

Sciopress



Make It So 5

*a
Star Trek
fanzone*

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THE INTERROGATOR

by

Marie Chettle

My first mission as First Officer, thought Picard as he walked along the corridor. Commander Jean-Luc Picard, First Officer of the USS Stargazer - I like the sound of that. Captain would be better, but Commander will do - for now, anyway. At least I won the bet. A smile appeared on his face as he remembered the look on Jack's face when he told him.

"Commander? You? You're joking!" he had said after the shock had worn off slightly.

"No, I'm not. My orders have just come through - if you want to see them they're in my room," Picard answered, rising from the chair in the bar where they had agreed to meet that night.

"It's all right, I believe you." He waved Picard back into his seat.

"I'll have a Scotch." Picard handed his glass to his friend.

"What?"

"I said I'll have a Scotch."

"You don't normally drink Scotch."

"I'm drinking it tonight, since you're paying for all our drinks."

"I'm paying for all... ?"

"The bet. Remember?"

The two words brought a series of memories flooding back, but one stuck out more than the rest. It was of himself and Picard, as cadets, in a bar much like the one they were presently in.

"I bet you," said Jack, slightly slurred, "that I will make First Officer before you."

"Oh, you will will you?" Picard replied, also slurred as he finished his drink.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, and the bet is for you to buy my drinks that night."

"Me buy your drinks?"

"All right then. The loser - who will be you - will buy the winner - who will be me - drinks on that night."

"You wanna bet on that?"

"I thought we just did."

"Oh. Well, let's shake hands and make it official," said Picard as his elbow slipped off the edge of the table.

"Better still - let's put it in writing." Jack got Rosie, the hostess, to bring some paper and a pen over. He started to write. "I, Jack... ' Jean-Luc, how do you spell Jack?"

"Give it here," said Rosie, taking the pen and paper. "What do you want to say?"

"I, Jack Crusher, hereby bet Jean-Luc Picard one night's worth of drinks, that I will beat him by being the first of us to become First Officer."

When Rosie had finished writing, Jack and Picard had both signed it. Rosie then had a copy made and gave one to each of them as they staggered out of the bar.

"Oh, God!" exclaimed Jack as the memory faded. His head was resting on his hand. "Scotch, I think you said?" Rising, he went to the bar.

"What ship are you assigned to?" he asked as he put the glasses down and sat again.

"The Stargazer."

Jack choked on his drink. "The Stargazer?"

"Yeah. Something wrong with that?"

"Do you know who commands the Stargazer?"

"Captain Harwood."

"Captain Harwood," Jack agreed. "You mean you've never heard of him?"

"Should I have?"

"You should if you're going to be his First Officer."

"So who is he?"

"Only The Interrogator."

"The Interrogator?"

"Yep. A meeting with him makes the Klingon Peace talks seem like tea with your Great-Aunt."

"Come on, Jack!" Picard laughed. "He can't be that bad."

"No, of course he can't. When do you meet him?"

"09.00 hours Monday morning."

"I'll meet you here at 13.00 hours, if your meeting's finished by then - and then you can tell me if he's 'that bad'."

"All right, I'll be here. By the way, Jack, fancy another

bet?"

"Depends what we'll be betting about."

"Who will reach Captain first."

"Oh, no." Jack leaned back in his chair, one hand in the air. "You've got an unfair advantage."

"Didn't think you would," said Picard as he and Jack settled down for a comfortable night of drinking and talking.

Now it was Monday morning and Picard was making his way to Captain Harwood's quarters to introduce himself. He stopped outside the door and rang the door chimes. He waited for a response... and he waited... and he waited. Finally a voice said, "Come."

Picard entered. "Commander Picard reporting, sir."

"Commander." They shook hands. "Please be seated."

Picard looked at the man seated across the desk as he sat. He could have been no more than 5 feet 4 inches tall, and his finely tuned muscles were just turning to fat. His mousy grey hair was thinning and he had a face that made him look like someone's grandfather. In fact, he probably was.

Jack must have been having me on, said Picard to himself. *This guy couldn't have earned a name like 'The Interrogator'.*

"Well, Commander, there are a few questions I would like to ask you, if I may?"

"Go ahead, sir." *Jack was definitely having me on!*

"How would you describe yourself?"

"Well... Honest, reliable, trustworthy..."

"Not hotheaded, reckless and foolhardy?"

"No, sir,"

"Then how would you explain the mess you got into with those Norsicans at Starbase Eirhart?"

"I suppose that *could* be described as being hotheaded, reckless and foolhardy."

"Yes, it would."

"But I learned my lesson and hope I have learned to control any tendency I might have had to that."

"I hope so too. Now, why did you join Starfleet?"

"Because I want to be an explorer, a discoverer, and space is the best place for that."

"What about family?"

"Well, my mother is - "

"No, no. I mean do you plan to marry, have children?"

Jenice, thought Picard. *No, that's over.* "No, sir."

"You'll be lonely later on."

"I may eventually marry if I live long enough."

"Mmm. Next question... "

And so it continued, with questions ranging from "Do you have any brothers and sisters?" to "Who's your best friend?" to how he would cope with a meeting with the Romulans. Finally it was over. Surreptitiously, Picard looked to see what time it was.

Eleven o'clock.

Two hours! It had seemed like four. Rising from his chair he started to leave the room, when Captain Harwood said, "Welcome aboard, Commander Picard."

"Thank you, sir."

"And for your first duty, I want you to see that these orders are carried out." He handed Picard a piece of paper.

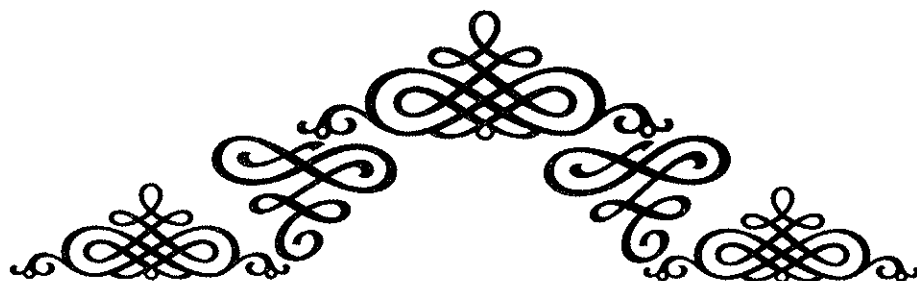
"Yes, sir."

Picard left the room and walked down the corridor. When he had gone far enough to be out of sight of Harwood's door he sagged against the wall and sighed.

Jack was right; he is an Interrogator! I feel as though I have been put through the wringer. He knows everything there is to know about me! Jack's going to laugh himself silly when he hears about this. First, though - these orders.

He looked down at the piece of paper the Captain had given him.

This will wipe the smile off your face, Jack! said Picard to himself as he straightened, a grin of satisfaction on his face. *Jack Crusher - welcome to the Stargazer!*



YES HE IS. NO THEY DIDN'T

by

P.J.Poole

Beverly Crusher let the door slide shut behind her, walked to her desk, sat down, ignored her terminal's "mail waiting" flag and contemplated an outburst of hysterical tears. Or laughter. Or both....

It was only 20 minutes since she and Jean-Luc had been rescued from their captors, 20 minutes since the lights went out a second after she had said that there were things she needed to tell him... impeccable timing that, indicative of a deity with a sadistic streak of humour and a love for melodrama.

Since the arrival of Riker and the rescue team, Jean-Luc had been too busy to ask her about her statement, but he would. Meticulous as ever, reticent as ever to enter into anything resembling a personal conversation with her, she still knew that he would ask at some point...

"It's about Wesley....." At least she hadn't got that line out! She sighed, and massaged her temples with her fingertips at the thought of how close the call had been.

"Has he the right to know?" Her words hung in the air, unanswered, unanswerable... "Have they the right to know?"

The second question was by no means an improvement on the first.

Twenty years ago it had seemed so simple. Both she and Jack, desperate for children, the discovery that Jack was incapable of fatherhood, his declarations that Picard was closer than a brother to him, that there was no-one's child he'd sooner raise if he himself could not... and her feelings, her slight knowledge at that time of Picard as a good man, a man she could see as an abstract entity and not the friend he grew to be after she had... The basic science had been high school project standard, given the equipment she had access to as an intern at the Hospital Station. It had been so easy for Jack to get himself and Jean-Luc called in for a medical, for her to re-route the sample for what she and Jack had called their "little bit of help..."

On frontier worlds it was still quite common for a friend of the family to oblige - even without the aid of technology, and heaven alone knew how many combinations of polyandries and group or contact marriage chains the Enterprise supported on board and at her regular supply bases... yet somehow Jack's reluctance to admit to his shortcomings had coupled with her own conservative background to prevent them from ever telling him... and every visit home that he wasn't told made it a little bit harder to break the news. Jack's death made it even more impossible, made her need to believe even more that Wes was her's and Jack's, was a living legacy from what they had shared...

Better to let sleeping dogs lie, she decided; find some harmless way to divert Jean-Luc when he asked, or better yet claim that she could not recall the incident, reduce it to insignificance... that was what to do. No problem. No problem at all... she hoped.

Decisively, she keyed her screen and read the first file - it was from Wesley, obviously keyed before her abduction. Gently, and without wishing to upset her, he asked if she could set up an appointment with Dr. Selaar for him... he had noticed that he seemed to be losing more and more scalp hairs every time he combed his hair and was worried about possible scalp infection.....



BETTER THE RIKER YOU KNOW

by

Margaret Connor

Lying on the bed in his quarters, William Riker slowly but surely fought his way back to consciousness. His first sign that all was not as it should be was when the room remained dark after he had instructed the computer to light it.

Strange, he thought. *Has the ship been damaged?* He tried to remember the mission they were on. *No*, he decided. *Then it must be me.*

He struggled to rise, and found himself too weak and dizzy to do so. *Drugged?* *No*, *sickbay must have been hours ago.* His heart began to race as he wondered, *What the hell's happening?*

On the bridge of the Enterprise the man sat smugly contented. So far everything was going to plan. If only he could get rid of that damned Betazoid - she was the only person who could discover his true identity. A slight frown furled the man's brow. The face of William T. Riker looked slightly strained, but no-one seemed to notice.

For four days everything had gone well for 'Riker'. He had spent his every off duty hour interrogating his alter ego, but the Human was strong-willed, and gave up his knowledge slowly and grudgingly. This annoyed the alien, but he couldn't hasten the process for two very good reasons. One, he had no idea how sensitive the Betazoid Troi's empathic skills were; if he caused Riker too much pain she might pick up on it. Two, the Santious, with the help of those weak-willed, do-gooding members of his own Illusion race, would find him.

Fortunately for Riker, on taking on his thoughts Redak - as the alien was truly known - had also given him the Illusion telepathic joining, which on the death of the Human would broadcast the shock, fear and pain of that final act. Redak needed the power of a Starship before he dared face the Santious again.

Will Riker's life had turned into a living nightmare. He now understood the reason for the darkness and the drugged feeling he had been experiencing for the past four days. Hours of drug-induced sleep were interrupted by hours of intense pain. This being was gradually stripping away the different parts of his mind, probing deeper each time, and he was getting weaker. Hunger and thirst were ravaging him, and he did not know how long he could hold off the madness that was surrounding the periphery of his mind.

Counselor Deanna Troi's duty shift was nearing its end when the

message came from Starfleet Command diverting the Enterprise to Placius Temptra V. Immediately she sensed a wave of panic erupting from someone on the bridge. She was amazed to realise that it came from Will Riker, and more alarming still was that for an instant his mind had not seemed Human.

"Captain," she said, trying to keep her voice as casual as possible, "may I speak with you in your ready room?"

Both Picard and Riker turned in unison to face her. She felt herself blush as she smiled and added, "It's a personal matter."

Once Picard and Troi had left the bridge Wesley Crusher, the young acting ensign, turned to Data with a puzzled expression on his face. "Mr. Data, what's the planet like?"

Data paused, tilting his head slightly to one side in the manner which showed he was accessing one of the many files in his positronic brain. "Placius Temptra V is a small agricultural planet, the head of the ruling council being the Trianium. It is a Class M planet, with a slightly higher oxygen content in the air and its gravity being sufficiently lighter to make a Terran feel as though he was floating rather than walking. Although not members of the Federation, they have friendly relations with Vulcan..."

Wesley seized the opportunity to use Data's own terminology on him. "Inquiry. Friendly with Vulcan?"

Data hesitated, his unblinking amber eyes seeming less focused than usual. "Ah," he said, "Human humour. Intriguing," he continued. "While full diplomatic relations have not been established, the Vulcans appear to be the only ones with the temperament to bring them into the Federation as full members, their present advisor being one Ambassador Sendok."

"Why Vulcan temperament?" asked Wesley.

"They take so long to decide anything."

Data's speech did little to help the panic 'Riker' was trying to control. He knew that as soon as they were in orbit the Captain would expect him to lead an away team down to the planet. That was something he desperately wanted to avoid, for Sendok was on that planet, and there was nothing he could do to hide his true identity from his highly trained and perceptive telepathic mind. He must find a way either to escape the away team or kill Sendok before he could say anything.

It was fortunate that the alien Redak had such cause for distraction, for had he been concentrating on the ready room he would have been alerted to the discussion going on between the Captain and his Counselor.

"Are you sure, Deanna? Why wouldn't you have picked up on this before?" Picard asked, amazed at her suggestion.

"I can prove nothing, but I assure you that is not Commander Riker on the bridge." She was pale with shock and concern. "I did, however, sense Will's presence, so he must be somewhere on board. As to why I didn't pick up on it earlier, this impostor obviously had strong mental shielding."

Picard paced the room like a caged panther ready to strike the

instant the gate was opened. A dozen questions were fighting for priority in his mind. The most important one was obvious.

"How do you suggest we attain Will's release?"

It was clear to both that the alien was a superior life force to have overcome Riker and maintained the deception this long.

"He seemed to lose control for an instant when we were diverted to Placius Tempura V. Possibly there is something or someone on the planet he fears," Troi suggested.

It was decided. While Data and Worf accompanied the impostor to the planet, Troi and La Forge would attempt to gain entry to Riker's cabin. Picard would have to remain on the bridge to avoid arousing the alien's suspicions.

"But Captain," Troi cautioned him, "you will have to find a way to limit the amount of time you spend with that being." She pointed towards the bridge. "He can read your thoughts."

Picard nodded in acknowledgement and sank into his seat behind the desk. He remained still, his hands steepled in front of him on the desk, obviously seeking a solution.

"Counselor, can you find a pretext to get him off the bridge while I'm in here talking to Data? Then I would only have to face him when ordering the away team and wishing them luck."

Troi agreed, though somewhat reluctantly. They both knew that because of her training in the mental disciplines she and Data were probably the only ones aboard that the alien could not read. She left the ready room without discussing her decision with the Captain. Should the alien scan his mind it would seem more natural if he knew nothing.

'Riker' had not felt such fear in a long time. He knew that in Data and Worf he had a formidable team. It would not be easy to find a logical reason to slip from their company, but lose them he must. He had to eliminate Sendok whilst giving him no opportunity to apprise the Santious of his whereabouts.

Thinking of them made 'Riker' give an involuntary shiver. The years he had spent on that planet trying to discover a means of escape! They had no right to detain him. Was he not a member of the Federation, an important one at that? So he had broken a few of the Santious' laws - what was that compared to what he offered them?

The Santious hadn't wanted anything he offered, and when after that last long frustrating meeting Ambassador Sendok, a fellow member of the diplomatic negotiating team, had discovered the body of the Santious' king, they had been horrified. Redak had been careless. He had struck out in anger, and had no means of covering his tracks, so his guilt had been obvious. It was then that the Santious had shown their true power.

They had known he was a natural shape-changer and telepath, so they had ensured that he was always trapped within a damper field created by the thought patterns of two of their own rank.

Then disaster had struck the Santious' world. A neighbouring

planet had exploded and thrown Santos out of its natural orbit, causing landquakes, tidal waves, all kinds of untold destruction. They had petitioned the Federation for aid, and the Enterprise had been despatched.

It was during all this turmoil that Redak had been able to escape. He had come across Commander Riker lying unconscious amidst what had obviously been a landslide. Boarding the Enterprise with the injured Commander, he had been able to pass himself off as one of Santos' own relief workers.

With his mind free again he was able to dupe the computer and hide until Riker had left sickbay, then he had made his move. Riker was still somewhat groggy from the treatment he had received, and was easily overpowered. Thus had Riker's nightmare begun. Now Sendok, that green-blooded, peace-loving preacher of logic, was a threat to all this - but not for long.

Although Lt. Worf assumed this would be an ordinary away team assignment, Lieutenant-Commander Data knew differently. While the other two members of the team had been making arrangements for their beam down, Data had answered the Captain's summons to the ready room, where Picard had explained Counselor Troi's revelations.

The moment the transporter chief reported the away team's departure Troi and La Forge rushed to Riker's quarters. As she had suspected, the privacy lock had been activated.

"This is going to take quite some time, Counselor," Geordi informed her. "These locks are, by necessity, hard to by-pass."

Deanna smiled and gently moved La Forge away from the door. Although Geordi could probably use the VISOR covering his sightless eyes to analyse and eventually aid him in circumventing the delicate circuitry of the door's computer, it was totally unnecessary.

Troi pressed her palm against the sensor panel and uttered the emergency code. Geordi jumped involuntarily as the door swooshed aside, then he remembered that Troi, as a member of the medical staff, would automatically know that emergency procedure.

"Strange," Troi said. "The computer allows us to enter the room, but does not acknowledge our presence by lighting it."

Geordi turned to answer her just as a groan pierced the darkness. They had found William Riker.

The Trianium marched backwards and forwards in the small plain room thinking of what the Vulcan had just said. The walls of the room were free of ornament, and even the native furniture seemed very severe.

"But what emergency is supposed to have occurred?" he asked exasperatedly. "What great tragedy has dragged the Enterprise parsecs off its course? I will have to tell them something, but you've told me so little." His agitated manner made his speech hard to understand, but the Vulcan had remained calm, of course, almost stoic, and had taken in every meaning of the man's behaviour. It was obvious the Trianium was scared.

"Why here?" the Trianium persisted. "Why not on board the ship itself?"

"Forgive me, Excellency, but the Santious and I had so little time, and due to your people's natural mental abilities we chose this planet rather than expose the crew and civilians who are novices in this area."

The Trianium abruptly turned to face him and almost shouted, "Yes, yes, we can prevent this Redak from trespassing into our minds, and I can inform Lieutenant-Commander Data and Lieutenant Worf of what you have told me, but what of the Enterprise? We still have no emergency."

Sendok approached the increasingly agitated ruler. "I have an explanation that, logically, should be accepted."

As soon as the transporter beam released them, permitting movement once more, 'Riker', Worf and Data surveyed the terrain that was Placius Tempura V. On their left, stretching as far as the eye could see, was a forest of tall majestic trees which by Human reckoning seemed centuries old. Tall, straight, almost untarnished lavender trunks with leaves varying between deep purple and pale pink swayed in the light, refreshing breeze. In the distance a range of fire-red mountains glowed smouldering and angry in the bright mid-day sun.

Once they had found their bearings they were led towards the Trianium's palace, a building made of red-orange bricks which seemed to radiate and shimmer in the warm glow of the salmon coloured sun.

'Riker' could sense Sendok's presence growing stronger as they approached the building; obviously that was where he was. But how was Redak going to avoid him until he could arrange a private meeting? Studying his two colleagues, he decided to wait until a more appropriate time. Once they were closer to the palace it would be possible for him to discover exactly where Sendok was. There was no sense in making them suspicious this early; that would only make his task harder.

Riker was aware of faces staring down into his, and was equally aware that he should know them, but the knowledge seemed to be missing, torn from his memory.

"What's happened to him, Troi?" Dr. Crusher asked, waving her tricorder over the Commander's inert body and staring eyes. "There isn't even any sign of recognition."

Deanna Troi struggled to snap out of the trance Will Riker's confused emotions had sent her spiralling into. "Someone has been tampering with his mind, and he has retreated deep within himself to try and escape." Her voice was strained with effort and emotion. "Can you sedate him so that I can try and bring him back?"

Normally Beverly Crusher would never sedate anyone in an unknown condition, but from the look on Riker's face and the readings on the diagnostic panel it was obvious that she had little choice.

.

Picard struggled to sit in his command chair and avoid pacing the bridge. Although it was not unusual to see his First Officer cover the bridge in ground-eating strides personally checking each panel in turn, Picard was noted for his calm persona; to react differently would only arouse suspicion, and that he could not afford to do. When the away team checked in everything must seem normal, for at present they did not know the range of the alien's powers.

'Riker' studied his surroundings as he and his two companions headed towards their destination.

"Emergency? Where? Why summon a Starship?" muttered Worf to no-one in particular.

Indeed, the inhabitants they passed barely acknowledged their presence, continuing to work in their fields harvesting what looked like purple corn.

"Not all emergencies are visible at first sight," Data answered, "but I am sure the Trianium would not summon us unnecessarily."

Approaching the gates of the palace they continued in silence, all three scanning the landscape, but all for different reasons. 'Riker' was searching for somewhere unobtrusive where he could meet and hopefully arrange a fatal accident for Sendok; Data was actually watching the Commander and trying what Humans called to second-guess him; Worf, being completely unaware of what was going on, was merely assuring himself of his ability to carry out his duties as Security Chief.

On entering the reception room of the palace 'Riker' was relieved to see no sign of Sendok. He was, however, troubled and bemused that he could sense nothing of what was happening around him. It was more than a little unusual, almost unnerving, that he should enter a room and find all minds closed to him.

"Greetings, gentlemen," the Trianium said, approaching them, a relieved expression on his face. "We are most grateful for your prompt reply to our call of despair."

The Trianium discreetly scrutinised the three officer facing him. If Sendok had not previously told him of the alien Redak masquerading as Commander Riker he would never have known. Now he must try and put Sendok's plan into operation.

"Commander Riker," he said, surprising Redak by knowing his supposed identity, "our problem is of a technical nature. You see, we have a rare but poisonous ore secreted deep in one of our many deserts, an ore such as your Federation has dealt with in the past. Normally it is kept harmless by a computer-enhanced forcefield, but due to a freak accident the computer is no longer operational, and we have not the technical knowledge to repair it." He paused briefly, but not long enough for anyone to interrupt him.

"It was on the advice of my adviser that I asked for your ship to be despatched with the necessary parts and equipment; with the help of the illustrious Lieutenant-Commander Data I was assured our problem would be rectified at the optimum speed."

The Trianium then suggested that 'Riker' go and make the necessary arrangements with Ambassador Sendok, who would logically expedite the correct Federation policies quicker than the Temprans themselves could, and proceeded to transfix the Enterprise officers by launching into a long and elaborate explanation.

Worf, in a typical low rumbling whisper directed at Data, said, "No wonder it's only the Vulcans who can deal with them."

Finally the Trianium reached his conclusion, indicating a small and rather insignificant Tempran who scurried instead of walking as he dashed from the room, obviously expecting 'Riker' to follow him.

"Of course, Your Excellency." 'Riker' nodded bemusedly and started after his guide.

As 'Riker' left Worf made to follow him, only to be stopped by Data, who was still watching the Trianium. Worf was about to protest, but something in Data's manner kept him silent. When the door closed the ruler began to speak.

"It is vitally important that you listen to me and do not interrupt. The man who just left here is not Commander William T. Riker, but Redak of Illusion..."

"Redak." The voice was calm, logical, and typically Vulcan. "It was illogical of you to think your escape would go unnoticed."

Sendok stood serenely in the middle of the lab floor. He watched as if uninterested as a wide range of emotions played across 'Riker's' face. Sendok knew his task would not be an easy one, and he had to rely on the timely arrival of the Santious.

Worf stared at the Trianium unbelievably. "Surely you do not expect us to believe that!" he thundered. "Such a being could possibly delude a few of us for a short time, but not the whole bridge crew, and certainly not Counselor Troi."

One part of Data's multi-phasic mind was astonished. This was just about the longest speech he had ever heard Worf utter, but he had to concentrate on the problem at hand.

"On the contrary, Lieutenant," he began, facing the full force of the Klingon's glare. "He was indeed able to mislead us for a number of days; however, recently the Counselor was able to see through his charade."

Before Worf could object to not being apprised of the situation Data continued, "It was deemed inadvisable to alert the rest of the bridge crew as the alien Redak is believed to have highly advanced telepathic powers." Data paused, turning to the Trianium. "What puzzles me, sir, is that you would risk speaking of it in such unguarded circumstances."

The Trianium smiled, his first genuine smile since the officers had arrived. "Due to the chemicals on this planet and the mental training our people undergo from childhood, it is impossible to invade the minds of our population, and we adults automatically shield the minds of visitors to prevent childish curiosity. Thus

Redak cannot use his mind control here, no matter how desperate he becomes."

Troi tried relentlessly to break through Will Riker's panic-stricken mind, and step by step she managed to piece together the hell he had been made to suffer.

Dr. Crusher noticed Riker's breathing improve at the same rate as Troi's became laboured. The Betazoid's chest struggled to rise and fall, and her deep dark eyes began to glaze. Just as Beverley decided to intervene and use the hypos she had prepared for both of them, she heard a strangled gasp followed by a ringing scream of pain and fear.

Troi sagged into a crumpled heap, narrowly missing hitting her head on the diagnostic table, her dark grey jumpsuit heavily stained with perspiration. As Crusher turned to treat her she noticed that the restraints lashing Riker firmly in place were no longer strained, and glancing up at his face she saw he was finally conscious, though staring at his surroundings confusedly.

"Will, just lie still and relax," she cautioned, and moved to where Troi was lying slowly regaining consciousness.

Everything seemed new and brighter to Commander William Riker, and he wallowed in the luxury of just being able to sit there and drink it in. For the first time in days he could freely choose his own thoughts without the forced direction of the being who had been stripping his mind layer by layer. His ruminations were brought to an abrupt end as the sound of Deanna's voice brought him back to reality.

"Will, the war isn't won yet," she said, struggling to regain her composure. "That was just the first battle."

The panic returned to Riker's eyes and he swallowed almost convulsively. "He's on the planet!" he gasped. "He's going to kill Sendok!" He started thrashing, trying desperately to get out of the restraints. "You can't let him!"

Deanna looked at Beverley, and then back at the Commander. "Will, how do you know all this?"

"Our minds are still connected. I can see everything he's doing."

Dr. Crusher was worried. She had seen Riker in many different situations, some puzzling and some downright horrifying, but she had never seen him reacting as he was now. The man was absolutely terrified; he seemed to be nearing his wits' end.

"Will." Deanna's voice interrupted her analysing. "You can help Sendok. Distract your other self. Send him your thoughts and crowd out his mind."

A stern look of concentration crossed Riker's handsome features as he sank back into the semi-conscious battle with Redak.

"Deanna!" Crusher exclaimed, and she rushed to sedate Riker.

Troi was suddenly in her way, and Beverley found herself

restrained by Geordi and the Counselor.

"Leave him, Beverley," Deanna almost pleaded. "If he is to come through this sane, he must win this fight."

Redak circled Sendok warily. This was not going to be easy, though he believed his own motivation would strengthen his chance of winning.

Without appearing to move Sendok was able to keep his powerful assailant in his view. He had no illusions as to how strong and determined Redak would be, but uppermost in the Vulcan's thoughts was to keep Redak occupied until the Santious arrived, and that he would do even if he forfeited his life, his very right to existence.

Giving no hint of warning Redak suddenly sprang and aimed a blow, which had it connected would have snapped Sendok's neck like a dry twig, but even as he began the move his momentum faltered, and the Vulcan was able to avoid him easily.

The turmoil in Redak's mind was of an unparalleled strength. Riker's barrage of thought from the Enterprise struck him a thunderous blow. Knowing he could not fight on both fronts he sent a killing blow towards the troublesome and now useless Commander Riker and turned to face the Vulcan, his stronger and more dangerous opponent.

Redak lunged mentally and physically; grasping Sendok around the neck he pulled him close, preparing to land a death blow. Suddenly Redak's mind was afire. He could no longer locate the Vulcan; all reality had vanished, to be replaced by an intense burning flame. Even as Redak lost consciousness to a Vulcan neck pinch his fury refused to abate. He fell into perdition's flame.

When the Santious appeared on Placius Tempura V there was no criminal for them to collect. No-one seemed able to explain exactly how Redak had died.

Counselor Troi and Dr. Crusher had pieced together the likeliest explanation, which appeared to be a culmination of circumstances. The time spent under the Santious' mind-damper field, plus his four-day battle with Riker, would no doubt have weakened him; this, coupled with Sendok's own mental powers and Riker's surge of thought from the ship, had probably resulted in the fatal outcome.

The thought Redak had sent hurtling towards Riker should have killed him as easily as it had killed dozens before him, but all it had actually done was to paralyse him with pain and fear for a few minutes. As the blow had reached Riker's mind he had cried out in agony and felt himself slip towards the welcome blackness of unconsciousness, but at the last second a rebellious thought had crept unbidden into his mind, and this though, boosted by the Santious' timely arrival, he had thrown back as an avenging blow at Redak. Timing, it must be said, was everything, for no sooner had Sendok been able to free himself from Redak's grasp than the mind blow had hit, thus resulting in the fatal combination.

At first everyone had sat in stunned silence. Even in the week

it had taken to compile the report many questions still lacked definite answers, and probably always would.

"Anything you'd like to add, Number One?" Picard asked, turning towards his First Officer.

Riker tried, unsuccessfully, to disguise the involuntary shudder that crept up his spine. "No, sir, I think Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi have covered everything."

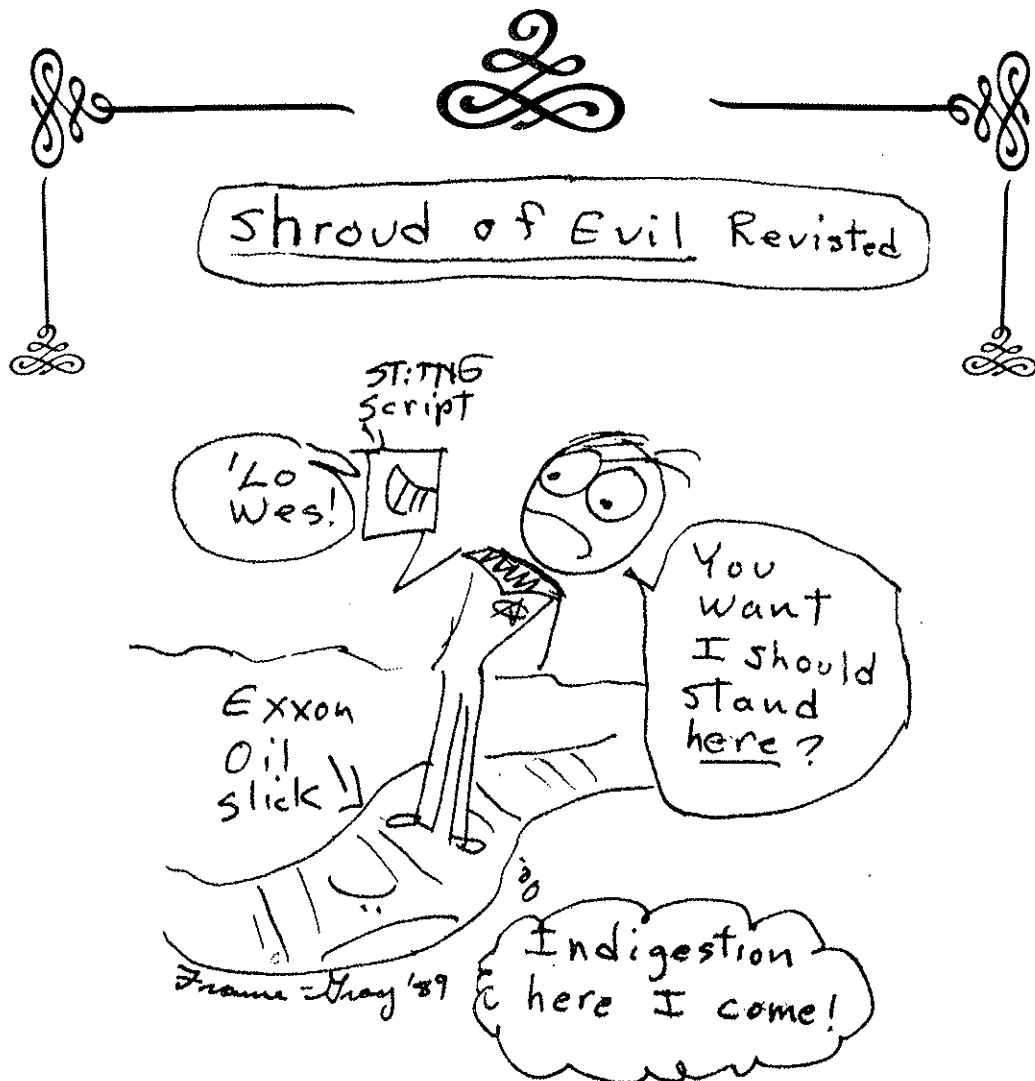
Although both ladies had certified Will Riker fit for duty Picard wished to see his bridge crew's reaction. "I can see no real reason for you not to resume your duties, Number One," he stated, checking their responses.

Geordi raised no objections. Worf, as usual, agreed with his Captain's judgement. Only Data's expression seemed strange.

Before dismissing the complement Picard turned to him and asked, "Mr. Data, you seem somewhat perturbed at Commander Riker's return to duty?"

Data looked startled, and had it been possible he would probably have blushed. "On the contrary, sir, surely the last two weeks have proved an adaptation of an old Earth proverb. 'Better the Riker you know than the Riker you do not.'"

Picard's voice cut through the loud groaning. "Stations, people. Our next mission awaits."



PAINFUL MEMORIES

by

Oriel Cooper

Captain Picard stood at the turbolift doors, momentarily frozen by the painful thought that the bridge would never be quite the same again. For him there would always be someone missing - someone he had cherished, not only as an officer but on a personal basis. Rank differences as well as perhaps the undeniable age gap between them had prevented any closer relationship between himself and Tasha. Yet she had been so dear to him. In some ways she had been the daughter he had never had.

He had spent several hours trying to analyse his feelings towards Tasha. Not all of them had been fatherly, he had to admit. She was - had been, he corrected himself - a beautiful woman, one who still disliked any reference to her good looks because of her experience with the rape gangs of 'New Paris'. There had been something about her loving and cheerful character that drew him. Q's cavalier treatment of her in that ridiculous 'penalty box' still angered him. The tears she had shed then had distressed him, and Tasha had been so angry with herself, with what she saw as her own weakness. He remembered his fury at Q's insolent words -

"Consorting with lower rank females, Captain? Especially ones in penalty boxes! Destructive to discipline, they say. But then you're what? You're only Human!"

Tasha had been embarrassed because Q had clearly heard her words to Picard...

"Oh, Captain. If you weren't a Captain!"

Picard had hated Q at that moment. Both for making Tasha cry and for his derision at Picard's attempts to comfort her.

Picard had tossed and turned in bed the night after Tasha's horrific, senseless death, wishing again and again that he had been able to tell Tasha how dear she was to him. Such expressions of deep emotion were difficult for him, had always been so even when he was younger. There had once been a young woman whom he'd loved, and yet... and yet he'd run away from her, shipping out before she could find him. Picard did not equate his feelings for Tasha with those he'd had for Jenice over twenty years ago. But the fact remained that he had cared for her very much, and her death would leave a gaping hole in his life.

Unbidden, thoughts of Jack Crusher had come flooding back. Another he had cared for. Was space going to rob him of everyone dear to him? Picard had chided himself for being morbid at that point, and had finally dropped into a restless sleep, full of ghosts from his past.

With a sudden jolt, Picard became aware that Deanna Troi and

Will Riker were both looking at him, their attention caught by his uncharacteristic hesitation before entering the bridge proper. There was compassion and understanding on Deanna's face and concern on Riker's. Deanna knew him better than almost everyone. She would know how desolate he felt, as well as how angry at the manner of Tasha's death, while he was unable to help her or save her life - as he had been unable to aid Jack. Perhaps he would talk to her after his duty period ended. Try and put into words the sense of loss he felt, could not help feeling, even though he knew that was not what Tasha would have wanted -

"Remember I died doing the job I loved."

Wasn't that the essence of her farewell message? Picard himself believed that death was but a doorway through which a person passed. That in a sense they were never very far away - they simply couldn't be seen, because they were in the room next door, so to speak. Tasha would live in his memory and in the memories of others. He looked across to Data. He would remember Tasha as long as he continued to function; she would have virtual immortality because Data would never grow old.

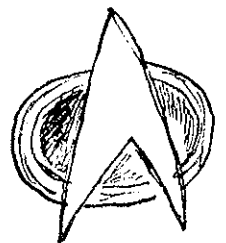
With the mental equivalent of a shake, Jean-Luc Picard continued his interrupted journey to the Captain's chair. But he avoided looking at the place where Tasha had always stood as he nodded at the bridge crew and said quietly,

"Status report, Number One."

He listened to Riker intently, and work aboard the Enterprise bridge continued in spite of the loss, as it had to. Grief was something to be dealt with out of working hours. Yes, he *would* have that talk with Deanna. He caught her questioning eyes as he turned, and gave an almost imperceptible nod. She smiled at him and leaned back in her chair, reassured.

The Enterprise sped swiftly through space to her next assignment. Her Captain quietly watched the ever-changing starfield, ready as always to see what was out there.





HEAVEN OR HELL

by

Marie Chettle

Captain's Log.

We are heading into a previously uncharted part of Sector 27, known as the Delta 7B System. We have discovered four planets of Class K, and are now heading towards a Class M planet, before we carry out orders that were sent 'for Captain's eyes only' a few days ago.

"Incoming message, sir."

Picard turned the Log off. "Put the message through, Mr. Data."

Data put the message through. "Come in, Enterprise. Enterprise, please respond. Am using visual."

I recognise that voice, thought Picard. "Go to visual."

A man appeared on the viewer, seated at a desk. He was in his mid-thirties and was dressed in a Starfleet officer's uniform.

Picard jumped out of his chair and moved to the centre of the room. A look of happiness was on his face. "Oh, my God. It can't be. Jack?"

"That's right, Jean-Luc. It's me - Jack. Didn't think you would see me again, did you? Look at you, Captain of the Enterprise, the best ship in the fleet. I always knew you would be."

Picard just stood there, his mouth wide open.

"I never thought I would see the day when old Phaser Mouth was stuck for words."

Sniggering could be heard on the bridge. Picard looked around. The sniggering stopped. "Jack... How is this possible?"

"Y'll find out when you get here. Now, I hear that Bev and West are on your ship. Can I see them?"

Picard touched his communicator. "Bridge to sickbay."

"Sickbay here. Dr. Crusher speaking."

"Doctor, can you and Wesley come to the bridge, please."

"Certainly, Captain. We're on our way."

"Oh, by the way - prepare yourselves for a shock. Bridge out."

"Now, come on, Jean-Luc, don't give the game away," said Jack,

a mock-hurt look on his face.

Picard, his right hand clasping his left elbow, his left hand resting on his chin, laughed. "Now would I do that?"

"No, I guess you wouldn't - not after all those practical jokes you played when we were at the Academy."

Riker looked at Picard. First shock, then a smile, appeared on his face.

Troi had been smiling during the whole of the conversation. The happiness she was feeling from Picard was overwhelming. She had never felt this much happiness from the Captain before, and was glad that with this happiness came a feeling of relaxation which Picard definitely needed. Closing her mind to the Captain's feelings, she concentrated on Jack. She was puzzled - there was nothing there. Not the normal feeling she got when she touched a shielded mind; there was just *nothing* there. It was empty. This worried her, but she wasn't sure why. She needed more information before she told Picard the little she had now.

There was a whoosh as the turbolift doors opened. Picard turned to see Dr. Beverly Crusher and her son Wesley emerging from the turbolift.

"You wanted to see us, Captain?" said Crusher as she and Wesley walked down the slope and over to Picard.

Picard looked at her and smiled. Then, removing his left hand from his chin, and with palm up, he pointed to the viewer. Crusher looked at his upturned hand, and then followed the line of it to the viewer.

"Hi, Bev," Jack smiled.

That smile! thought Crusher. *How many times have I seen it - a hundred? A thousand? It's still the same... and so are you, Jack. Oh God, how I missed you! Why did you have to die?* By this time tears were streaming down her face. Her hands were in a prayer position encasing her nose. Slowly she moved her hands across her cheek-bones, wiping the tears away. "Oh, Jack!"

"Now, Bev, don't cry. I know this has come as a shock to you. I was shocked when I heard that you had joined Starfleet, but I knew you could cope with it, just as I know you can cope with this: You haven't changed a bit, not after all these years. I'm sorry I had to leave you, but death does do that, you know." He laughed.

Dr. Crusher smiled and wiped some more tears from her left eye.

"That's better, Bev. Now who's this big strapping lad next to you? It can't be the little lad I used to bounce on my knee, can it? West, is that you?"

Wesley's smile broadened at the use of the nickname his father had for him. "It's me, Dad."

"Look at you, a cadet already. I heard something about you being an acting ensign?" Wesley, with hands clasped behind his back and head bowed smiled and nodded sheepishly. "I hope he earned that title, Jean-Luc. You didn't just give it to him because he is my son?"

"He earned it, all right." Picard smiled at Wesley.

"Well, I'm glad you and he are getting on well together. You never did get on with children, did you?"

Picard shook his head.

During this - and the previous - conversation, Data had been busy checking the visual picture and voice pattern against those on record for Lt-Commander Jack Crusher. Now he had his results. "Captain, I have verification from visual and voice patterns that this is indeed Lt-Commander Crusher."

"Mr. Data, I don't need verification. I know who this is!" snapped Picard angrily.

"Don't get angry, Jean-Luc. The bloke is only doing his job," explained Jack. "Wouldn't you do the same if your Captain received a message from a dead friend?"

Picard nodded. "I suppose I would. Sorry, Data."

"That is all right, sir. As the Lt-Commander said, 'The bloke is only doing his job'," stated Data, using Jack's voice for the quote.

Jack laughed. "Boy, what we could have done with him at the Academy, Jean-Luc! Think of the jokes we could have played!"

"Trust you to think of something like that."

"You know me - forever resourceful. Well, Jean-Luc, I will have to go now as there are some more people who want to talk to you."

"Who?"

"The Interrogator, for one."

"The Interrogator?" asked Riker.

Picard turned to look at Riker. "Captain Ian Harwood," he whispered.

"But he's dead!" Riker blurted.

"Of course I'm dead. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't," boomed a loud, gruff voice. Turning to look at the viewer, Picard and Riker saw a middle-aged man with mousy-grey hair. "And in case you've forgotten, Commander, the Lieutenant-Commander here - " he pointed off screen - "is also dead."

Oh, God, thought Riker. How could I have said such a stupid thing?

"Hello, Ian," Picard said.

"That's 'sir' to you," barked Harwood. "Just because you are now the same rank as me doesn't mean you can get familiar and start calling me by my first name. Anyway, how are you? Still slouching, I see. How many times have I told you about it? Stand up straight!"

By reflex, Picard took the position of a military man told to stand at ease, hands clasped behind his back, legs slightly apart, and back straight.

"That's better. Well, Jean-Luc, you look better than I did at your age, but then I had a wife who enjoyed cooking." Harwood patted his stomach. "You never married, did you?"

Picard started to shake his head.

"Didn't think you would, you're not the marrying kind. Now - what about my ship?"

"Your ship?"

"Yes, my ship. The Stargazer. What's happened to her?"

"Well, we recently got her back, and now she is being refitted."

"What do you mean, 'got her back'?" Harwood's temper could be heard rising in his voice. "You didn't leave her, did you? What happened that forced you to abandon her?"

"We got attacked by... "

"Not now. I want a detailed report when you get here. I want to know what everyone was doing, and I mean everyone, from you down to the cargo and R&R personnel. I want to know what happened, where, how and why. Then I want to know what has happened since."

It's like being back on board the Stargazer, said Picard to himself.

"That'll do for now. I want you to report to me in person as soon as you get here." Riker opened his mouth to protest. "Never mind the rules, Commander. You and the rest of the senior officers will be beaming down too, once you've talked to the next person."

Picard turned, walked back to his chair and sat down. Looking at Riker, he said, "I wonder who else from the past they've decided to invite."

"Hello, Captain."

Picard spun round to look at the viewer. "Lt. Yar!" Everyone in the room looked at the viewer.

"Yes, Captain, it's me," said Tasha Yar, looking around the bridge. "None of you have changed a bit. No, almost all of you. There are two exceptions. The most obvious one is of course Wesley, who's grown quite a bit." She smiled. "The other one is Commander Riker." She stifled a laugh. Riker looked hurt. "Sorry, sir, it's just a shock, you having a beard. It does suit you, though."

"Thank you, Tasha." Riker smiled.

Yar's smile broadened. "It's good to see you all again. I hope you will all join me down here when you arrive?"

"I'm sure we will," Picard said. "Data, what is our ETA?"

"Eleven minutes 27 seconds," came the reply.

"Thank you, Mr. Data. Lieutenant, we will beam down as soon as we arrive."

"Good, I'm looking forward to it." Tasha looked off screen. "Captain, Captain Harwood has asked me to remind you about that report he asked for."

"Oh, yes. I'd better get on with it. Lt. Yar?"

"Yes, sir?"

"It's good seeing you again." Turning to the rest of the bridge, he said, "I'll be in my office." With that, Picard left the bridge.

"Captain, we are now in a stationary orbit around the planet." Riker's voice floated over the stillness of the air in Picard's office.

"Thank you. Make preliminary sensor scans of the planet. I'll be there shortly. Picard out." Rising from his desk Picard left his office. Upon entering the bridge, Picard turned to Data and said, "Mr. Data, I want the results of the preliminary sensor scans as soon as possible."

"We are getting the first results now, Captain. The planet is a typical Class M planet. Atmosphere and gravity the same as Earth. Zoological and botanical life abundant." Looking at his console and checking some new results, Data continued, "Sir, sensors have just picked up a fairly large force field in the northern hemisphere of the main continent. It originates at the same co-ordinates as the message did."

"Sensor readings?"

"Sensors are unable to penetrate it, sir."

"Open hailing frequencies to the planet."

On the viewer, the picture of the planet changed to one of Lt. Yar.

"Lieutenant, can you tell me why there is a force field on your planet?"

Yar looked off-screen at the sound of Jack's voice. She then laughed.

"What?" asked Picard.

"Sorry, Captain. Jack says it's to keep the beasties out." Yar burst into laughter again.

Picard smirked and just managed to keep from laughing. Data looked puzzled. Then, understanding, he said, "A Human joke?"

"Yes, Data." Turning back to face Yar, Picard said, "Now, seriously, Lieutenant, why is there a force field on your planet?"

"I don't know, Captain. It's always been there. It has been ever since I arrived."

"Will we be able to beam down directly?" asked Riker.

"No, you will have to beam down near-by - I will give you the co-ordinates - and then enter through the doorway."

"The doorway?" asked Picard.

"It's a weak spot in the force field. We all entered through it."

"I see. Very well, send the co-ordinates and we'll beam down straight away. Picard out! He nodded to Data to turn the hailing frequency off. He then opened ship intercommunications. "Dr. Crusher, Acting Ensign Crusher and Counselor Troi report to transporter room four immediately. Chief O'Brien, report to the bridge." Switching off, he said, "Mr. Data, Lt. Worf, Lt. La Forge - report to transporter room four as well."

Data and La Forge rose from their consoles and met Worf at the turbolift just as Chief O'Brien arrived.

"Mr. O'Brien, you have the con." Picard turned to Riker. "Come along, Number One, we mustn't keep the others waiting."

"Captain, I must say that I disapprove of your beaming down." Picard looked at him. "For the record."

"Your disapproval has been noted, but I see no danger in my beaming down, as the away team is large and is quite capable of doing its job - which I am sure you will tell it is to protect me. Besides, I know the people down there, and I would trust any one of them with my life."

"That's exactly what you will be doing."

"That's enough, Number One. I am beaming down, and that's final."

"Yes, sir." With that, they joined the others in the turbolift.

As soon as they arrived, Data took some sensor readings with his tricorder. "The force field is this way, sir." He pointed in a south-westerly direction. "On the other side of the hill."

"Let's get going, then." Picard started off in the direction that Data had pointed.

Riker hurried to keep up. Protecting the Captain was going to be more difficult than he had thought, if he continued to carry on like this. But Riker understood why Picard was being less cautious than usual. It was because of the excitement - the excitement of seeing some old, dearly loved and dearly missed friends again. The excitement was clouding Picard's judgement, but Riker wasn't going to let it cloud his.

When they reached the force field, they circled it looking for the doorway. It didn't take them long to find it. It was a hazy, thin, electric-blue area, whereas the rest of the force field was a thicker, more solid-looking gold colour. Standing behind the force field was Tasha Yar. When they arrived at the doorway, she walked

over to a control panel that was situated near the doorway.

"Deactivate doorway."

The doorway shimmered and faded.

"You can enter now," Yar said politely. When they entered they saw a number of buildings.

"What are those buildings used for?" asked La Forge, pointing to them.

"Those are our homes," said Yar, walking ahead. "One of them houses the generator for the force field. If you'll follow me, we'll go and find the others."

They set off towards the buildings. Turning to Picard, Yar said, "Captain, I hope you have Captain Harwood's report? He won't be too happy if you haven't."

"It's all right, Lieutenant." Picard tapped his head. "It's all in here."

They walked a little further until they found themselves in a square in the centre of the buildings. Here, Jack and Captain Harwood were waiting. Upon seeing them, Jack rushed over to Beverly Crusher; he gave her a hug and kissed her on both cheeks. She was so happy she felt as though she would burst. Jack then moved to Wesley, hugging him also. Then, holding him by the shoulders, he stood at arm's length and looked him up and down.

"You're growing into a fine young man," he said with pride. Then, spotting Picard over Wesley's shoulder, he shouted, "Come here, Jean-Luc!"

He held out his hand; Picard shook it. "Now don't think you're going to get away with just that! Come here!" With that, Jack hugged Picard, patting him on the back as well. Standing back, with an evil grin on his face, Jack said, "Look at you! Hair today, going tomorrow."

Picard cracked up. When he had managed to stop laughing, he asked, "God, Jack, how do I manage without you?"

"You manage because you have good people working for you - like my wife."

Picard was about to reply, when -

"Jean-Luc, I would like that report now." Turning, they saw Captain Harwood approaching.

"All right, Captain," Picard said as he walked towards Harwood. "Shall we go to your house?"

"Yes. This way." They started off towards one of the buildings.

Picard suddenly stopped and turned to face the others. "I'll see you all later."

"But Captain - " started Riker.

"I'll be all right, Number One. Now go and enjoy yourself, and that's an order." With a smile he turned and continued to follow Harwood.

"Come along, then, Bev, West. We have a lot to talk about," said Jack as he put an arm round each of them. They set off towards Jack's house.

Wesley turned and waved. "See you later!" he cried happily.

Riker returned the wave, then turning to Yar said, "Well, it looks like you're stuck with us."

Yar smiled. Looking round, Riker asked, "So which one's your place?" Yar pointed to a building on the right. "After you, then," Riker pointed ahead. Yar started off, and with one look in the direction Picard had taken, Riker followed.

Hours had passed since the landing. Data had plied Yar with questions about how she got here, what the planet was like, and who was in charge. Many of these, she could not answer.

La Forge had been wondering, during those long hours, about his VISOR readings of Yar. They seemed familiar, yet he couldn't say what the familiarity was.

Beverly and Wesley Crusher joined them for dinner. Jack and Yar didn't join them, as they said they didn't need food. Data did, as Riker said that the Captain would want a report when he joined them. But Picard didn't come, and now it was well after dinner with still no sign of him. Riker was worried. He knew he shouldn't have let the Captain go off alone, no matter who he was with.

Troi saw the worry in Riker's face and understood why it was there. She had to reassure him that the Captain was all right, so she opened her mind. She cried out.

Riker was by her side in a second. "What is it?" he asked.

"Pain. I sense pain!"

"The Captain?" The worry in Riker was growing worse. She nodded as she closed her mind. "Will you be all right?"

She nodded again. "I'll be fine."

"I don't suppose you know where the Captain is?" This time she shook her head. "We had better start at Captain Harwood's house, then." *I should never have let him beam down, let alone go off by himself,* thought Riker. *But when Captain Picard makes up his mind, then you don't have a chance in hell of changing it.*

They set off for the place where they thought Picard would be.

But Picard wasn't there. At least, he didn't think he was. In fact, he didn't know where he was. All he was sure about was the fact that he felt awful. Drugs, probably. But how? Where? And more importantly, who and why?

Slowly he opened his eyes. He couldn't see much - his sight was blurred - but he could make out shapes moving round the room.

"He's awake," a voice said. The voice floated through Picard's drugged mind. *I know that accent, he thought. But who...? Why can't I remember? The drugs, Jean-Luc! The drugs! But what kind of drugs? Beverly will want to know... Oh, God! The others! Are they safe? Of course they are... they didn't let all this get to them. They kept their heads... whereas you, Jean-Luc, let the sight of Jack and the others go to your head. Why didn't you listen to Will? Will! He must be worried sick about me... To let your Captain beam down to a possibly hostile planet is bad enough, but to lose him as well...*

Footsteps could be heard approaching. Picard tried to see who it was, but all he could see was a dark shape.

"Now, then, Captain." It was the same voice as before. "You're going to answer a few questions for us, aren't you?"

Picard spoke, but the combination of drugs and the dryness in his throat made his answer inaudible. The shape leaned closer. Picard tried again. This time his answer was heard.

"No."

The shape got angry. Grasping Picard's face between his thumb and forefinger, he said, "Oh, yes you will, because by the time we've finished with you, you'll be begging us to listen." Pushing Picard's face to the right, he let go. "Let's begin. Now, Captain, where is the meeting being held?"

With difficulty, Picard asked, "What meeting?"

"The meeting of the Federation delegates and Starfleet Command. The meeting you received orders about a few days ago."

"I received no orders."

A shock passed through Picard, causing his body to arch against the chest, wrist and ankle restraints that bound him to the chair he was in. He cried out. It felt as if every nerve-end in his body was on fire. The pain stopped.

"Now, Captain, what about this meeting?"

Picard didn't answer. Another shock passed through his body. The question was asked again, and again he did not answer and again the shock came; and so it continued.

Riker and the others had searched all over Captain Harwood's home, and still they hadn't found Picard. Not only that; Jack, Yar and Harwood had disappeared.

"Data, have you found any sign of the Captain yet?" asked Riker.

Data looked up from the tricorder he was studying. "No, Commander."

La Forge had been studying the building. Now he shouted,

"Commander Riker!"

Riker ran over to where La Forge was kneeling on the floor.

"This section of the floor," La Forge said, feeling about, "is not made from the same stone as the rest."

Suddenly his fingers found a crack. Pulling gently, he started to lift a section of the floor. The others hurried forward to help.

Under the floor, a series of steps could be seen leading down.

"Set your phasers on stun," Riker said as, setting his, he started down the steps. The others obeyed and followed him down. At the end of the steps was a tunnel. As they moved along it, Data tried his tricorder again. Still no results.

It must be the stone, he thought.

Suddenly the tunnel split in two. Voices could be heard down the right-hand one. Worf and Riker moved forwards, slowly. Riker's foot hit a pile of loose stones; the voices stopped. Two shadows appeared ahead, then phaser shots whined past their heads. They started firing back. They heard a thud as one of their attackers went down; the other turned and ran. Riker gave chase, and there was another exchange of fire before he managed to stun him.

Turning back, Riker met up with the others. Troi was bending down to look at the first of the stunned attackers. Shock ran through her as she rolled him over.

"A Vulcan!"

Everyone looked. Sure enough there were the pointed ears and the high eyebrows.

"But what would a Vulcan be doing here?" Wesley asked.

"He is not a Vulcan," said Data as he picked up something from the floor. He passed it to Riker as the others crowded in to see what it was.

It was the insignia of the Romulans.

Clasping the insignia tightly in his fist, Riker said, "Come on. Let's find the Captain."

They started along the tunnel again. A little further on they came upon some sort of machine. Data, La Forge and Wesley checked it over.

"It seems to be some kind of projection equipment," stated Data, "very much like our holodeck equipment."

La Forge nodded. That explained the readings he'd got from Yar. The Romulan holodeck readings were not quite the same as theirs.

"Well, that explains our friends from the past, but it doesn't explain what's going on here," Riker stated, "or what's happened to the Captain. Come one - let's find out."

They carried on along the corridor again. After a while, Data

stopped.

"Commander!" he exclaimed softly as he held up his hand for the others to stop.

"What?" whispered Riker, stopping.

Data moved slowly forward. The others followed quietly. Then they heard it too; faintly at first, but it grew stronger with each step they took. It was the cries of someone in pain.

The Captain! thought Riker as he hurried forward.

Soon they could hear another voice in the gaps between the cries. They could not understand what was being said, but the voice sounded angry.

Off to the side was an entrance to a room. Riker and Worf darted across, then readied themselves to enter. Data and La Forge did the same on the other side.

Riker peered round the corner into the room.

There in the room were three Romulans and Captain Picard. Two of the Romulans were standing by a machine; the third was standing next to Picard, who was strapped into a chair. This Romulan was speaking to Picard. "Now, Captain I ask you again; where is the meeting to be held?"

Picard didn't answer; the Romulan signalled to the others. Picard cried out as another shock passed through his body.

Anger had been growing in Riker since the Captain's disappearance; now that anger exploded. Rushing into the room, he fired his phaser, stunning one of the two Romulans by the machines.

The others followed. Worf's shot hit the second Romulan by the machine; Riker's next shot hit the final Romulan.

Picard didn't notice any of this; the machine was still sending the shock through his body.

Riker looked at Picard. "Turn that machine off!" he shouted behind him. Turning, Data fired a single phaser blast at the machine. There was a small explosion as it burst into flames. Picard slumped in the chair.

Rushing forward, Riker knelt beside the Captain and started to undo the restraints. "Captain, are you all right?" he asked.

Picard turned slowly at the sound of Riker's voice. "Number One, is that you?" He strained to see clearly.

"Yes, Captain, it's me."

"The others?"

"They're here. Dr. Crusher!" he called as she and the others crossed the room.

Kneeling, Crusher began to check Picard over. "There doesn't seem to be any permanent damage," she said to no-one in particular. "But he has been drugged." Looking at Picard, she asked, "I don't

suppose you know what drug it is, Jean-Luc?" Picard shook his head. "Didn't think you would. I'll have to run some tests when he get back to the ship." She looked at Riker.

"Let's get going, then," said Riker as he undid the last of the restraints and helped Picard out of the chair. Picard felt his legs buckle under him as he rose, and was glad of the support Riker offered.

With Data and La Forge in the lead and Worf bringing up the rear they set off back along the tunnel. They didn't meet any more Romulans as they made their way back to the steps. Finally they reached them. Negotiating the steps was rather more difficult than Picard first thought it would be; finally he surrendered to the idea that Data should carry him up.

Upon leaving 'Harwood's' house, Riker tried to contact the Enterprise, but he got no response.

"Commander, the force field is still up," explained Data. "If you will allow me..."

"All right, Data, but take Worf with you."

Data and Worf set off towards the power source that was registering on the tricorder. Soon they found the building that housed the generator. Once they had entered, they made their way over to what Data thought was the control panel.

"Do you think you can figure out how to deactivate the force field?" asked Worf.

"Of course." Worf relaxed. "Given time," Data added.

"How much time?" Worf asked, tense again.

"Unknown." Data started testing some of the controls.

Picard was seated on the ground, leaning against a wall. His eyesight was improving and his head was clearing. *The drug's wearing off, he thought. Must be the air.*

As his head cleared, he started to think about what had happened. *I must remember to say in my report that it was my idea to beam down and that Riker did try to stop me. I don't want him getting the blame for what's happened.*

What has happened? I mean, I know what has happened but I don't know who... Thinking back to the 'conversation' he had had with his captors, he remembered what accent they had. "Romulans," he said aloud.

Riker turned to look at him. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

Picard looked at Riker. "I said 'Romulans'. That's who's involved in this."

"Yes, we know." The others had started to listen to the conversation. "What we don't know is why."

"I do." Picard thought for a moment. "I don't suppose it

matters much now, seeing as you would have to be told before we arrived anyway." He pretended not to notice the others listening. They deserved an explanation after what they'd been through. "A few days ago I received a message 'for Captain's eyes only'. It gave details of a meeting that's going to take place in about a week's time."

"A meeting? That's what the Romulans were asking you about?"

"Yes. They wanted to know where it's taking place. I didn't tell them." He didn't add how close he was to breaking when his men found him. "I can't even tell you. You see, it's a meeting between some Federation delegates and Starfleet Command, and if the Romulans found out where it was..."

"They would try to assassinate the delegates and the Starfleet officers," Riker finished, beginning to understand.

"And so leave a lot of planets - and Starfleet - without leadership, if only for a few days. It would throw many of the planets into turmoil, and there would be nobody to organise a force to stop them from invading Federation space," Picard finished.

Riker nodded in agreement.

Suddenly the force field began to shimmer and glow as it became stronger. Riker jumped to his feet and moved away from the wall to get a better look at the force field.

"What are they playing at?"

"Haven't you found it yet?" asked Worf.

"I believe this is the switch," Data said, his hand resting next to a switch.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because this is the only one I have not tried." With that, Data threw the switch.

The force field began to shimmer and fade, then it was gone.

"They've done it!" exclaimed Riker. Then, touching his communicator, he said, "Riker to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here," came the reply. "Go ahead, sir."

"Six to beam up."

There was a shimmer as the transporter beam locked on, then they were in the transporter room. "When you've locked on to the rest of the away team, beam them up immediately. I'll be in sickbay," he told the ensign as he helped Picard out of the room.

Behind him, Data and Worf began to appear on the transporter pads.

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It was a few days later, and something still worried Picard. He was in his office when Crusher entered.

"Yes, Doctor?" he asked as though the intrusion bothered him.

"Deanna thinks we should talk," she replied calmly.

"Well, you can tell Counselor Troi that we *don't* need to talk!" He didn't look up from his work.

"Something's bothering you." Crusher sat down.

"Now you can read minds too." Picard looked up. "All right. Yes, something is bothering me. It's Jack. I never knew how much I missed him until now."

"I know how you feel. I miss him too." Looking at her, he saw for the first time that she had been crying.

"Of course you do," Picard said ashamedly. "I shouldn't be thinking of myself; this has affected you far more than it has me."

Rising, he walked round the table and sat on the edge. "It's just... There's something I don't understand."

Crusher kept quiet, knowing it was better for the Captain if he let it all out. "I understand why they used Jack and the others to lure me down to the planet," he continued, "and I understand how they found out things about Tasha and Harwood - also some things about Jack - from the computer files. What I *don't* understand is how they found out the rest of the things about Jack and me. Private things, like that nickname he had for me." Picard looked embarrassed. "And some of the other things that were said. I mean, only Jack and I - and maybe one or two others who might have been there at the time - knew about them."

"I know," Crusher said calmly.

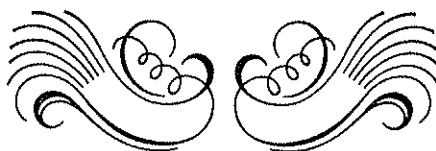
Picard looked shocked. "How?"

"Jack kept a diary. He put everything in it." Crusher smiled. "Even your nickname."

Picard nodded. "That explains how they found out."

"Mmm. If they can find out about a secret meeting, they can find out what a Lieutenant-Commander wrote in his diary." She started to leave as Picard returned to his chair. Stopping, she turned and said, "By the way, Captain, I'm going to let Wesley read Jack's diary." She then left the room.

Oh, God, he's going to find out everything Jack and I did! thought Picard as he watched her leave. *It's going to be all round the ship! I'll never live it down!*



HAPPY BIRTHDAY

by

Lori Scott

Captain Picard walked hesitantly into the Ten Forward lounge. It had been a long day and promised to be a longer night, and he needed something to help him get through it. Almost with a will of their own his feet carried him to the bar; whether for a drink or for the companionship he knew he would find there, Captain Picard could not say. When he didn't see her, after sitting alone for several minutes, he considered leaving and was preparing to do so just as she sat down next to him.

"Hello, Captain."

"Guinan."

She seemed almost to read his thoughts and answered the question he did not ask. "I had an errand to run."

"Hmm. Aren't you going to ask me why I'm here? You usually do," he enquired somewhat jokingly, but Guinan took his question with a seriousness he had not intended.

"Not this time, Captain. I already know why you're here. Let's move over to the table in the corner. It's more private."

She didn't even stop to see if Picard would follow her. He stopped short however when he saw two glasses and a decanter resting on the table.

"Guinan, this table's occupied," he protested.

"Yes, I know. By us. Now sit down."

Picard looked around the room as Guinan poured two glasses of some amber liquid from the decanter. He kept expecting something, anything, to happen, but Ten Forward was mostly deserted. Those crewmembers who were present were far too preoccupied to take notice of the fact that their Captain was having a drink with their Chief Hostess.

"Captain." Picard focussed his attention on Guinan again and realised that he was still standing. Dropping smoothly into one of the seats, he reached for the glass that she held out to him. "Rough day."

It wasn't a question, but Picard answered her anyway. "Not too bad."

"Captain, in all the years I have known you, you have never lied to me." Guinan paused and studied his face. "Until now," she said with a certainty that unnerved him.

"Do you want me to tell you that it has been a terrible day? Do you want me to tell you that there were times when I felt like

running screaming off the bridge? Do you want me to tell you that I almost snapped Wesley's head off for smiling at an Ensign who's just about his age? Just for smiling at her. Is that what you want me to tell you, Guinan?" His voice held a deep bitterness, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Yes, Captain. That is exactly what I want you to tell me. Try the drink; I think you'll like it."

He obediently sipped at his glass, and Guinan smiled when the grimace hit his face.

"This... is... awful! Didn't anyone ever tell you there's a rule against poisoning your Captain?" he grumbled.

"I must have been gone when they announced that rule. Keep drinking; it grows on you."

"Guinan... "

"Hey, I don't tell you how to fly your ship - you don't tell me how to pick my drinks. I guarantee that this one will do you some good." Now she smiled at him, and Picard couldn't help but be partially caught up in her optimistic good humour. "Let's have a birthday toast," she suggested.

"Why not?"

"To Jack," she said as she raised her glass.

Picard echoed Guinan's toast and downed the last of his drink. "I really cannot stand this stuff. Jack would probably have loved it." He spoke with just a touch of irony, but some of the bitterness was gone from his voice. Being around Guinan had that effect on people, and Starship Captains were not exempt from her influence.

"He did like it very much, but he hated it as much as you at first." Guinan was practically gloating, and that fact wasn't doing a great deal to bring back Picard's good humour. When he made a sound vaguely resembling a growl, she took that as her cue to continue speaking. "Wesley was in here earlier. Looked a bit like a puppy that's been kicked."

"And that's my fault?" he said sarcastically.

"I'd say so. Not good for morale if the Captain starts beating up on his crew. Especially the young ones."

"I'll apologise tomorrow. Will that satisfy you, Captain Guinan?"

"It will do. Actually, he was so worried about your being mad at him that I don't think he had much time to think about what day today is. By yelling at him you may have done him a favour." Guinan held that last bit out like a life preserver to a drowning man.

"Doesn't help. Do you know where he is now?"

"I think he went to call his mother now that the ship's close enough. They'll both be fine." Guinan poured herself another glass from the decanter. "Would you like some more?" she asked even

though she already knew the answer.

"No. I'm just about ready for some sleep. Goodnight, Guinan." He started to stand up, but the room began turning at odd angles and he sat down again.

Guinan, who had finished her second glass of the abhorrent substance and was starting on her third, seemed not at all affected. "Are you all right, Captain?" she asked.

Picard cursed silently; he'd been so preoccupied with trying to clear his head that he'd forgotten she was there.

"I'm fine," he answered stiffly, but the cautiousness with which he took to his feet contradicted his words. "Now, goodnight, Guinan."

"Goodnight, Captain," she returned, but she doubted he heard her. Going back behind the bar, Guinan locked the decanter away in its special cabinet. She wished, not for the first time, that the drink had the same affect on her that it had on Humans.

Captain Picard sat in his command chair, and quietly surveyed the bridge. Everything appeared to be running smoothly. Lieutenant Commander Data and Commander Riker were talking animatedly on the upper deck, or at least Data was as close to animated as he could get. Wesley was at the Ops station, and one of the Ensigns was conferring with Lieutenant La Forge over the intercom. It was an unusually peaceful day for the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise; even a Captain could - almost - relax.

This is certainly a far cry from yesterday, Picard thought. Why he'd become so upset over its being Jack Crusher's birthday, he was no longer certain. The only thorn in his side was Beverly - or rather, Beverly's absence. He could only be grateful that Dr Pulaski had not yet found a reason today to start an argument with him. Katherine Pulaski could be a bit hard to deal with at times; that did not mean however that she wasn't a good doctor. On the contrary, she was an excellent physician. If it weren't for the fact that Katherine's arrival had heralded Beverly's departure, Captain Picard would have been greatly pleased by the new addition to the crew. As it was, they had an uneasy relationship at best, but even thinking of that could not spoil Picard's good humour. He glanced unhurriedly at the chronometer and realised that his duty shift had ended twelve minutes ago.

"Number One, you have the con. If anyone needs me I'll be on the holodeck." He stepped up to the turbolift, but as the doors closed behind him...

"What is this!?"

Captain Picard stared in amazement at the bridge of the U.S.S. Stargazer. He knew that he couldn't possibly be on the holodeck already, but what other explanation was there? Then a frightening thought occurred: what if this was another Ferengi plot? The last one had almost destroyed his ship, and the one before that had nearly cost him his life. Picard spun around in disbelief when someone spoke behind him.

"No, Jean Luc. It isn't the Ferengi again, just me. And I'm

rather glad they're not here. Though I never had the... er... pleasure of meeting the repulsive little creatures, if they're half as revolting as you think they are I know I wouldn't have liked them."

So great was his shock that Picard did not even consider the fact that he had not actually verbalised his suspicions about the Ferengi.

"Oh dear God. It can't be. This simply cannot be." The words came out with a pleading quality, and the man started to put a hand on Picard's shoulder, but the Captain shook him off. "Who are you?" he commanded.

The other man ignored him and took a seat at the navigation console. Only after he had swivelled the chair to face Picard did he respond to the query. "Who do you think I am?" His voice was congenial, even friendly, and he seemed genuinely interested in his companion's answer.

He is so perfect, Picard thought. How can this man be a simulation when he is so very perfect? Even the way he moves... "Jack?" It emerged as the merest whisper of sound.

"Hello, my old friend. It has been a long time." Jack Crusher smiled up at his Captain with a sincerity that wrenched at Picard's heart. If he allowed himself to, he could almost believe that all of it was real... that Jack was real. He could not afford the luxury. Picard turned, but the turbolift behind him would not open.

"What are you?!" he demanded of Jack's image.

"I thought we'd established that already." Jack seemed not at all concerned by his friend's anger. "It's just me here, Jean Luc. Relax. There is no danger to you in this place, or to the Enterprise for that matter."

"Then why can't I leave?"

Jack took a deep breath; his eyes seemed shadowed with an emotion that Picard did not want to recognise. It wasn't possible. You could not hurt an illusion.

"You are free to go at any time, if that is what you wish." As Jack spoke the door behind Picard opened, and a computer generated voice asked to what deck he wished to be taken. He was still on the bridge of the Stargazer, but it was an Enterprise turbolift into which he gazed. "You can leave now, but I had hoped you would stay... for a short while."

Despite himself, Picard felt his doubt, his anger, his fear, all of it, melting away. Impossible not to trust that voice.

"Jack..... Jack, you died." It was all he could do to get the words out. Picard sat down in the seat next to Jack's, desperately hoping that there was something Jack could say that would make it all make sense.

"I know, and I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!" Picard covered his eyes with his hands. "I don't understand."

"That's why I'm sorry. I wish I could explain everything to you, but I can't. I don't really understand myself why I'm here. I just know that I am." He looked sympathetically at his friend. "Was it very bad, Jean Luc?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly good. As if things weren't already bad enough, they sent me this... I can't think of a single polite word to call him. Let's just say that the new First Officer that Starfleet sent me was less than satisfactory."

Jack gave him a doubtful look. "Come on, Jean Luc, he couldn't have been that terrible if he had made it to command rank."

"He lost a shuttlecraft." Not an ounce of emotion showed on Picard's face.

"Jean Luc, when a starship goes out on a mission it occasionally loses a shuttlecraft. It happens. Shuttlecraft get destroyed." He sounded entirely reasonable, and Picard just couldn't resist bursting his bubble.

"He didn't destroy it, Jack. He LOST it."

"He lost it."

"That's right. We never did find it."

Jack just shook his head in disbelief. "Oh Jean Luc, I'm so sorry. If I'd had any idea it would be that bad... What happened to him?"

Picard answered in the most serious tone he could manage. "They made him an Admiral."

Jack's incredulous expression was simply more than Picard could stand; he didn't even attempt to control the laughter that spilled forth.

"You're joking!"

"It's... it's true. I swear."

By now Jack was laughing too. And when at last the laughter was finished, they sat together in a comfortable silence. Theirs was a friendship of many years that needed no words. Picard breathed deeply, taking in the scent of the Stargazer's bridge. The last time he had set foot on this bridge it had smelled of blood and dust and years of neglect, but not so now. It was as it had been years ago, a time when he had still believed in miracles, when his dearest friend had stood by his side, and nothing was impossible. Only happy memories roamed through his mind.

After a length of time he could not measure, Jack broke the silence.

"Captain Picard... "

Uh-oh, he thought. Jack only calls me that when he thinks I've done something exceptionally stupid.

"What exactly is an Acting Ensign?"

"What?"

"You heard me. I know what an Ensign is, and I know what acting is. So what's an Acting Ensign? An Ensign who acts?"

"I take it this has something to do with Wesley?"

"You could say that." Jack was being altogether too serious for Jean Luc's peace of mind.

"I thought you'd approve of Wesley's position. He works very hard, Jack."

"I'm sure he does, but making him an Acting Ensign... that's crazy!"

"You were the one who always said having *families* on a starship was a good idea."

"I do. Goodness knows I complained often enough about the fact that Beverly and I could never bring Wesley on any of our ships with us, but that is not the issue. It is one thing to have children on a starship. It is quite another to allow them on the bridge, and worse still to make them members of the crew." Jack stood up and paced the bridge. "You made a fifteen year old, inexperienced, naive boy an officer, and then promoted him directly to the bridge!"

"Wesley works as hard and as long as any other member of my crew. If he lacks a certain experience and schooling that's only because he is young."

"That's exactly my point! He is too young. I'm sure Wes will make a fine officer some day, but he should have experience before he's stationed on the bridge of a starship."

"He is getting the experience he needs on the Enterprise. How would he get experience if no-one ever gave him a chance? Even Starfleet has recognised his accomplishments by allowing him to continue his studies on the Enterprise. He has earned his position, Jack."

"Oh... and I'm sure his assignment as Acting Ensign has absolutely *nothing* to do with the fact that he's your son," Jack answered sarcastically.

"WHAT!!" Picard stopped breathing at Jack's statement.

Jack just sat down again and with a haughty upturn to his nose crossed his arms in mute defiance.

"Jack... I... That's damned ridiculous!"

Jack seemed to consider this for a moment, and then spoke with a false detachment. "It is?"

"Of course it is. Regardless of what you say about me, I cannot believe that you could, for even a moment, consider the absurd notion that Beverly was unfaithful to you. She is one of the most loyal, caring, and loving people I have ever met. She loved you. It almost tore her apart when you died, and now you sit there and suggest..."

"I never thought that either of you were unfaithful to me, Jean Luc." His voice was softly quiet in a way that far overpowered shouts or screams.

"...that Beverly cheated on you.....! What did you say?" Picard stared down at his friend; he couldn't possibly have heard Jack correctly.

"I said that I never thought you and Bev had an affair." Then he muttered under his breath, "At least not while I was alive."

"Then how can you think Wesley is my son?" If Jean Luc had thought he was confused when he first arrived on the bridge of the Stargazer, he hadn't even known what confusion was.

"Because he is." Jack raised a hand to stop him when Jean Luc started to protest. "No. Let me explain. I know that you aren't physically Wesley's father, but a few minutes of biology isn't what makes a father. It's what's here - " Jack tapped his chest - "that counts. I've been gone a long time, Jean Luc. Now, in many ways you're as much his father as I ever was." He stopped. Picard wasn't shouting or pacing anymore, he was just standing there looking at Jack as if he had lost the power to move. "Can you stand there, and honestly tell me that the only interest you have in Wesley is his career in Starfleet? Or is there something more there?"

A dozen different answers spun around in Picard's mind. *I care about all of my crew; I've never liked children; I don't want a family;* so many different answers, but when he gazed at Jack, Picard could not bring himself to utter any of them. "No, I can't tell you that. He is... important to me."

"I thought so. At least as important to you as Beverly is."

Picard surprised him by not denying the insinuation. "Yes."

"Hmmm. It must not have been easy for you when she left. She is a great lady, and consequently not an easy one to say goodbye to. I should know; the only thing I ever really regretted about being in Starfleet was having to be away from her and Wes. A terrific lady."

An involuntary smile came to Picard's lips as he, too, thought of Beverly Crusher. It disappeared even more quickly than it had come however, when he noticed Jack watching him. A wave of guilt swept Picard.

"Jack, I... I'm sorry." Much to his shock, Jack started laughing.

"For what? For being Human? Face it, Jean Luc, by your own admission she's a very caring and loving lady. It was only a matter of time before somebody noticed. I mean, I could hardly expect her to mourn forever, and frankly I wouldn't want her to." Jack paused and locked his eyes with Picard's. "You've always had excellent taste, mon ami, and well... she could do worse." Then he smiled wickedly. "But not *much* worse."

Picard couldn't resist responding in kind. "Thank you. You do wonders for my ego. And I think I know you really want Beverly and me to get involved."

"Oh, really? And just why is that?"

"You just don't want Beverly marrying the man she was seeing when she met you." Picard was practically smirking.

"Do you mean Dr. 'I know everything there is to know about medicine-women-and-everything-else-in-the-universe' Cundiff? That guy?"

"That's him. He was aboard the Enterprise right before Beverly left for Starfleet Medical, and it was extremely obvious that he was more than a little interested in renewing their past relationship."

"And was Beverly... uh, interested?"

"My dear man, Beverly has much better taste than that," he replied indignantly.

"Do you realise that you just complimented yourself, and me?"

"Well..." They both laughed, and Picard wondered again at how good it felt to finally be able to talk to Jack.

"So, tell me," Jack said. "How's this new Number One of yours? William something or other."

"William Riker. He's a good officer. Not like you, more formal, rule orientated, but still a good officer. You'd like my Second, Data; he's an amazing fellow."

"So I hear. I'm glad you're getting on so well, buddy." He sighed and stood up from the navigation console. "I think it's about time for me to go now."

Picard did a small double take. "So soon?" he asked.

"'Fraid so. I'm glad we got to see each other again, Jean Luc. Take care of yourself, my friend."

Jean Luc held his hand out for a handshake, but he didn't resist when Jack drew him into a hug.

"Goodbye, Jack. And... thank you... for everything."

He smiled and walked past his friend to the turbolift, but just as the doors opened Picard called out to him.

"Jack!"

"What?"

A slow smile spread over Picard's face. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Captain."

The doors closed, and he was gone. The silence on the bridge was deafening, and without a second thought he too walked into a turbolift and left the Stargazer behind. His life on the Enterprise was waiting for him.

Guinan slowly surveyed Ten Forward from her position behind the bar. Everyone was smiling, and the sound of happy gibberish filled the air. Then Guinan's eyes came to rest on the profile of Acting Ensign Wesley Crusher. He sat slumped forward with his elbows on the bar and his chin in his hands. One foot rhythmically kicked the lower portion of the bar, while the fingers of one hand tapped his

cheek in time with his foot. Guinan knew something was up. Wesley never slumped.

"Hi, what can I get for you?"

Wesley didn't even look up.

"Nothing..... Thanks."

"You must want something. How about some Androsian spring water?"

Wesley didn't answer her. He would have had to be comatose to pay her any less attention.

"How about that water?" He still didn't answer her, and Guinan decided to use a different tactic. "Wes, the Captain wants you on the bridge immediately!"

"What?" Of course *that* would get his attention.

"Water?"

"Oh... yeah, sure," and then he was gone again.

Guinan gave a disgusted sigh as she set a glass down in front of him. Ten minutes later the glass was still sitting there, untouched.

"Your mother just walked in." Guinan smiled as she said this.

"Uh-huh."

"With Worf." The smile got wider.

"Um-hum."

"They're going to announce their engagement." She leaned forward until she was practically nose to nose with Wesley.

"That's nice." The smile disappeared.

"They're getting married because she's pregnant."

"Terrific."

"With Commander Riker's baby."

"Uh-huh."

"They want you to leave Starfleet to take care of the baby."

"Sure."

Guinan looked over Wesley's head at Geordi La Forge. The Chief Engineer had been right. Something was bothering the kid, and she nodded her head slowly to let Geordi know she'd take care of it. She placed one of her hands over one of his and drew it down away from his face.

"Wesley, we need to talk."

He looked down at the hand that held his to the bar and then up

at Guinan's face. *Finally*, she thought, *I've got him out of his stupor.*

"I thought we were talking."

"No, I was talking. You were brooding." Her statement seemed to surprise him.

"Oh come on, it couldn't have been that bad."

"I told you that your mother was marrying Worf, and you didn't so much as bat an eyelash," she pressed.

"What?!" He sat up so quickly that for a moment Guinan was afraid he'd fall off the bar stool.

"Now see, that's the reaction I should have got. Instead I got an 'Uh-huh'." Guinan mimicked his tone of voice almost exactly.

"Well, I guess I have been a little preoccupied... "

"It happens to the best of us. Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's really nothing to talk about." Wesley was trying to withdraw again, but she wouldn't let him.

"If you don't want to tell me then go see Deanna, but you have to talk to somebody. Even if you don't mind being in a stupor like this, you can't go on duty in this condition."

Wesley seemed to mull this over for a while.

"I don't want to talk to Troi. I'd much rather talk to you." He smiled up at her, and Guinan watched as some of the sullenness dropped out of his features. "It's kind of complicated. I'm not really sure where to start."

"It's about your father, isn't it." It was not a question.

"How did you...?"

"Call it a lucky guess. I thought that after the incident with your Starfleet exams you said it didn't really bother you any more."

Wesley sighed before he spoke again. "In a strange way, that's the problem. I know this isn't going to make any sense, but... Guinan, have you ever been depressed because you weren't depressed?"

"You're wrong, Wesley, it makes perfect sense. So tell me all about it." She pulled a stool up behind the bar and sat down facing him.

"Yesterday was kind of an anniversary."

"I take it this wasn't the kind of anniversary you like to celebrate," she said.

Wesley laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Hardly. It was my father's birthday."

"But that isn't what upset you, is it?"

"No. You see I've always observed dad's birthday, and the fact

that he can't, as regularly as most people observe religious holidays or wedding anniversaries. Only instead of throwing a party I would always spend the whole day moping around, and then at night I'd wind up crying myself to sleep." He finally picked up the spring water and took a sip, but it had reached room temperature long ago and Guinan pushed it away when he set it back down.

"How about a root beer?" She set one down in front of him but did not speak, and Wesley knew she wanted him to continue. "Anyway, yesterday rolls around and... nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Not a thing. It was like a normal day. What's worse is that, not only was I not in a bad mood, I was in a wonderful mood. All day. I mean, I spent half the day working on an engineering project with Geordi, and then I went skiing with my friend Chris, and..." He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Guinan, I didn't remember. It wasn't just that I wasn't upset, I didn't even remember. I woke up this morning and all of a sudden it hit me. I just... Oh, I don't know."

"You feel like you did something wrong."

"Something like that."

Guinan sighed. She'd thought it might be something like this. "Wesley, you didn't do anything wrong."

"Guinan! He was my *father*! How could I not remember?"

"Wes, I understand what you're going through." Guinan began, but he wouldn't let her finish.

"You don't understand anything!" he yelled and ran out of Ten Forward. She started to go after him, but a better idea occurred to her. Guinan stayed behind the bar and waited.

"Guinan."

There was a deadly quietness to the Captain's voice that was far more threatening than anything else Guinan could have imagined. He wished that just once she would respond to his irritation instead of just keeping that blasted calm of hers.

"Yes, Captain?"

"What was in the drink you gave me last night?"

"Why, was there a problem with it?"

"I'll let you know as soon as you tell me what was in it."

"I don't know all of the ingredients," she started but he cut her off.

"That is not what I mean and you know it!" If Guinan didn't explain soon Picard was going to blow.

"It was just something that I thought you needed last night. I think it helped from the look of you. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong. I have felt better today than I have

since Beve... for a long time. But last night I had some very odd dreams. I feel wonderful, but I would rather work through my problems on my own than owe my good humour to some... DRUG. Guinan, there must be a reasonable explanation for why you gave me that drink. I came here to give you a chance to explain before I... "

This time she cut him off. "If you came here for me to explain, then why don't you stop arguing and let me explain?"

There was not even a hint of anger in her voice, and it was that which convinced him that maybe he had jumped to the wrong conclusions. He drew in a deep breath, "All right, I'm listening."

"The drink I gave you was not an anti-depressant, it was not hallucinogenic, and it wasn't an emotion altering drug. I realise that you probably had some very disturbing experiences last night, but as you said, the end result was that you were finally able to work through what was bothering you. The drink I gave you doesn't affect what you feel. It merely acts as a catalyst and releases those feelings that are already inside of the person who drinks it. It doesn't act until the person who consumed it is asleep and dissipates at the instant that consciousness returns, so it in no way impairs the person's abilities to function. Not everyone who drinks it has the kind of positive result that you did. It all depends on the individual. Whatever demons you exorcised last night, Captain, you dealt with on your own. There are no side effects, no long term problems and addictions. I've never heard of anyone drinking it more than once. So, now that you know the truth would you undo what happened last night?"

Captain Picard thought about that until he could answer her with complete honesty. "No, I wouldn't undo it. But I would never do it again." He paused. "Guinan, I have always trusted you implicitly, and you have never done anything to make me regret giving it to you. However, last night you went too far. Don't ever take that kind of liberty with me or any other member of the crew again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. I apologise and I'll consider myself on report." He might have believed her if she hadn't been smiling so widely. "You still feel better though?"

Despite himself, Picard smiled at her concern. "I haven't felt this rested in years."

"Then getting yelled at was worth it, but I'll never give it to anyone on board again as per your orders."

Suddenly something occurred to the Captain. "You've never given it to anyone else on board, have you?"

"No."

"Good." He headed for the corridor, but Guinan stopped him.

"Captain, before you go, would you speak with Wesley? He was in earlier, and he was pretty upset."

"Where is he?"

"I think he's in his quarters."

"I'll see what I can do to help him."

"Have a good day, Captain."

He nodded and walked out of Ten Forward.

"Wesley, I'd like to talk to you. May I come in?"

Acting Ensign Crusher just stared in shock at Captain Picard. *Oh no, he thought. Guinan must have told him about the scene I made in ten forward this morning. I'm gonna get court martialled. As if I wasn't already in enough trouble for yesterday.*

"Come on in, sir."

"First, I'd like to apologize for the reprimand I gave you on the bridge yesterday. I was a bit harsh, however you were still in the wrong so don't let it happen again."

Wesley tried to respond, but found that he had lost the power of speech.

"Now, did I ever tell you about the time that the crew of the Stargazer threw your father a surprise birthday party?"



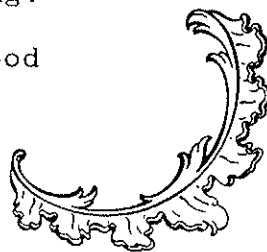
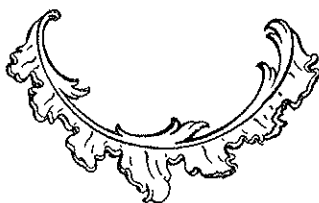
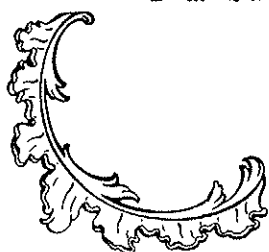
REQUIEM FOR TASHA

If you look up at the stars tonight
And see them shining, ice-crystal bright,
The brightest star in all the sky you'll see
Won't be a star at all - it'll be me!

Shooting past the Moon, away from the Sun,
My eternal adventure just begun.
I'll visit new worlds, my spirit will soar,
Going where no-one has gone before.

So don't grieve, my friends, shed me no tears;
I leave you now with no qualms or fears.
Joining the sweet music of the galaxies' song,
I'm back in the Universe, where I belong.

Linda Wood



A SMALL MEASURE

by

Brenda Kelsey

"This is supposed to be a celebration."

Jean-Luc Picard smiled wryly, as if something he had eaten had soured in his stomach.

"It is, Doctor. Believe me, it is."

Kate Pulaski folded herself onto the grassy knoll beside him. "Then why aren't you celebrating?"

Picard looked at her, a long, measured look that she wished she knew how to interpret, but she simply hadn't been aboard long enough and the Captain had proved to be a private and very elusive person.

"That's Counselor Troi's line of attack."

Pulaski looked over to where Deanna Troi was apparently deep in conversation with several gaily dressed people.

"But she has... other things on her mind."

"Perhaps the same other things that I have on my mind. So if you'll excuse me, Doctor..."

Pulaski held him in place simply by reaching out and grabbing his arm. She had a strong grip and he couldn't pull free without attracting attention, so he subsided back onto the grass. She released him immediately.

"You're that worried about Data? Still? You won."

"Not about Data!" The words were clipped off and Pulaski suddenly realised who else was missing from the happy throng that filled the holodeck.

"Will? But why?"

"Because he is who he is."

"And because he is not here. You think he stayed away deliberately?"

Picard nodded. "Data has gone to persuade him to come here and join in the celebration." His voice sounded strangled.

Pulaski laughed. "Data is just a machine. He won't feel resentment towards Will for doing his duty."

"The whole point of the last few days is that we have proved that Data is not 'just a machine'. Data is a sentient being. Commander Riker very nearly won."

"He feels guilty?" It wasn't so much a question as a startled exclamation.

"Try to put yourself in his place. He had to argue a case to prove that a person he regards as a close friend was nothing more than a sophisticated toaster!"

"I can't regard a... machine... as a friend."

"Then the loss will always be yours, Doctor."

Pulaski blinked at the sudden harshness in the Captain's voice. "You like him - Data, I mean - that much?"

"He's third in line of command of Enterprise. I... admire all that he has been able to accomplish in the short period of his life. Despite all the prejudice - yes, Doctor, *prejudice* - that continues to linger in some people's dealings with him. He is a fine person and he will continue to develop as a person long after all of us are dust. If I can help him now, while he is still young, I will do so."

"Was that a warning?"

"Just don't go too far in your attempts to investigate him. You would treat any other crewmember with a certain degree of respect for his or her feelings of privacy. I expect you to extend that same courtesy to Commander Data."

"Now *that* is an order."

"Yes, Doctor, it is, and it is one that I expect you to obey."

Whatever retort she was going to frame died on Pulaski's lips as Picard's attention shifted from her to the entry arch where Data and Riker appeared to stand shoulder to shoulder. Relief and joy shone for an instant on the Captain's austere features before he closed his eyes and bowed his head in a moment of thanks. Then he rose smoothly from her side without a backward glance and joined the crowd around the newly arrived pair.

Deanna Troi simply walked up to Riker and tucked herself against him, fitting neatly against his side as his arm wound about her shoulders. Riker's rueful smile at Picard spoke volumes, as did the almost indulgent smile received in return. Then La Forge said something that cracked Riker and Troi up. The pair stood hugging each other and laughing as Data asked first La Forge then Wesley for an explanation. Picard closed his eyes and shook his head, sighing in a gesture of almost parental despair. Worf, towering over his Captain, looked unimpressed by the antics of those about him, but also supremely comfortable just being there. The group was soon swallowed up by more of the crew as the celebrants really began to party.

Feeling more of an outsider than she had since the first day of her new assignment, Pulaski slipped away from the party and beamed down in search of Captain Louvois. As she had expected, the JAG officer was hard at work, but Pulaski was immediately shown into her office by the solitary Ensign attached to the JAG department. The calm projected by Captain Louvois was just too casual to be real, and Pulaski smiled and dropped lazily into the visitors' chair before being invited to do so.

"When he figures it out he is going to be very angry."

Phillipa Louvois blinked. "When who figures what out?"

"Captain Picard. He will work it out. When he calms down. You know that, don't you?"

Louvois leaned back in her chair and waved a hand. "Hopefully he'll be a long way from here before he does. Otherwise I might need your professional services."

"You wouldn't get them. I'd be in the brig too, having helped him and Will take you - and the Admiral - and whoever else was involved, apart."

"Oh, for star's sake, calm down, Doctor. Don't you think that I was angry when this was first put to me? I argued for days with the Judge Advocate General central office before I accepted the orders."

"You knew what you were doing to them. To Jean-Luc and Will, and Data." Pulaski added the third name hoping that the slight hesitation would go unnoticed.

Captain Louvois placed her hands flat on the desk. "There was no other way. Please believe me. We had to do this to get Commander Data's legal status recorded as a matter of law. This was the quickest way to do it, and it avoided a lot of unnecessary publicity. It should have been done years ago when he was first accepted at the Academy."

"Why wasn't it?" shot back Pulaski.

The woman shrugged. "Because the majority of the Interview Panel expected him to fail. To be washed out along the way."

"Oh, wonderful! Do you have any idea, any idea at all, just how close your 'quickest way' came to breaking up the command team of Enterprise? *That* close, Captain!" Pulaski held up finger and thumb so that light was barely visible. "Will is feeling as guilty as hell and Jean-Luc is blaming himself for letting this happen to his people."

"For 'letting it happen'? He had no alternative. It was planned this way."

Pulaski straightened, eyes narrowing. "You played poker with a stacked deck and the stakes were three careers."

"We dealt from the bottom, sure, but they could have folded. They had the choice."

"No they didn't, and you know it. You knew they wouldn't leave Data to be disassembled by Maddox. And if they had lost your little game, if Will had won, do you know what that would have done to them? Do you? Do you care?"

"Do you?"

"Yes! Yes, I care." Pulaski found that she was shaking with rage. "I've known Will for a long time, and although I don't know Jean-Luc well yet, I've read enough of his record to be able to admire him as a Captain and as a man. I care about them. And I

care about the people on Enterprise. Over one thousand people depend on them, and I am responsible for their safety and well-being. Understand this, Captain. If anything like this is ever done to MY people again, I will find a way to destroy everyone involved."

Louvois smiled mockingly. "I've read your record, Doctor. You don't consider that Commander Data is sentient."

"What my opinion is is not at issue here. It's what my *Captain* and my *Exec* believe that's important. They think that he is. If they didn't, he wouldn't be third in the Command chain. So I'm willing to accept their decision on this matter while I try to make up my own mind."

"You don't have to worry about it any more. He is sentient. It's a matter of law now."

"Don't be so smug, Captain. You got used too."

"But I knew that I was being used," countered Louvois.

"Did you? Tell me, oh omnipotent law-maker, what reason did the Judge Advocate General's central office give you for having this fiasco here?"

"It was a legal anomaly. Commander Data did not have a recorded citizenship claim, so he wasn't, on a legal basis, a person. Now, legally, he is."

Kate Pulaski roared with laughter, her anger at the JAG office dissolving as the pomposity of the statement registered. Suddenly she could see the humour of the situation, and it was a truly glorious joke. She rocked backwards and forwards, hugging herself until tears rolled down her cheeks. Finally she sobered up enough to stand.

"Now that is wonderful. In fact, it's priceless." She laughed again. "Now if you'll excuse me, Captain, I'm going to go and enjoy myself at Data's party."

Louvois looked concerned. "Wait," she ordered. "What's the joke?"

"Joke? You're the joke. All the approaches about making new laws are so perfectly tailored to fit your ego that they must have had a team of high class operatives working on you for months. It shows like a pulsar whenever you open your mouth. You believe it!"

"Working on me?" Louvois stood, consternation growing. "What do you mean?"

Pulaski gazed at the now confused woman, pity warring with amusement in her clear eyes. "Look at the reasons that they gave you. Starfleet suddenly being concerned about the legal status of an android? Now? After all this time? For his sake? Or for theirs?"

"Theirs?"

"You've had access to Data's career record. You heard it at the hearing you convened. Don't you think it would be very embarrassing for Starfleet to have to admit that they award medals

for gallantry and valour to a sophisticated, over-engineered toaster?"

Louvois plopped back into her chair, her face whitening with shock.

Pulaski left, satisfied at the result of her visit. Approval and acceptance did have to be earned, and she had decided that she wanted those intangibles from the command team of Enterprise. She wanted to stay, to belong. It wouldn't be easy, but it would be rewarding.

Smiling, she walked confidently back to the transporter room, and went home.



WATERMARK

by

Lorraine Goodison

Take care of her for me. The words echoed in his head. Did Paul Mannheim really understand what he asked? Taking a sip from his glass, Jean-Luc Picard let go a small sigh. Yes, *he did*, he admitted to himself, and therein lay the crux of the problem.

He found himself beginning to pace and forced his body toward the window. No, Jenice was never a problem. He'd never given her a chance to become one.

The window reflected his features, but what he saw was her face. She was so... vibrant, so fresh and clear. It was as if the years had never really passed, but all he had to do was look in a mirror to disprove that theory.

A small smile curved his lips as he recalled the look on her face when they first spoke in sickbay. She had seemed genuinely delighted while he felt so wary in case she held his actions against him. Not Jenice. She had always possessed a mature serenity which carried her through everything. It had been that quality which first drew him to her, as if she could quiet the brash, burning restlessness his younger self thrived on. It was ironic that her steadfast certainty was the very thing which made him leave, all those memories ago.

Paris. He'd been away far too long. Once all he had to do was think of it and he was there. Now the memories were fogged by time's passage and he required the aid of a computer to bring it back.

The same could not be said of Jenice. He remembered her too well; her presence in his life had left an indelible imprint of memory and emotion. Like a watermark, she remained faint and endurable, never there but never really gone. Seeing her here, suddenly once more part of his life, had been a jolt to his subconscious and a jangling reminder of feelings he'd thought erased.

He stared into his own eyes, shot with flecks of streaming starlight from the deeper vision beyond. A frown creased his forehead and he took another sip. He should be getting back to the bridge. This was ridiculous, mooning over her like this.

Merde!

Turning on his heel, Picard left the window to approach the controls on the table. He stared at them for a moment, wanting music to break the solitude but unsure what he wanted to hear. Something soft... "Schubert, Impromptu No. 4."

As the computer obliged, Picard drifted over the unfinished work on his desk. It had nothing to capture his interest. A stroll across to his library brought the same empty result. He felt faint

irritation stir. It seemed Jenice would not be dismissed so easily.

It had not, he recalled, ever been easy to forget Jenice. As easily forget his soul, or so it had seemed when love was the burning passion of youth. His duties had taken up much of his time, filling his mind with new routines and experiences, but there had been times when the memory of her was so strong, she was there with him.

It was fear. Strange that now he could accept the emotion which had pushed him away from her, the emotion which said - choose. After so many years of using the fear, channelling it into a stronger impulse toward action, it was difficult to remember the youthful agonies which had forbidden him the unknowns of a close relationship. Seeing Jenice again, speaking to her, had reawakened old, old doubts, leaving the bittersweet taste of 'what if' to cloud his mind.

What if. Ah, it was easy to look back now and and say it was all for the best, he'd made the right decision, but what of the lurch his heart had made when he heard her voice? What of that, eh?

You're too old for this, Jean-Luc. Too old and too certain in your solitude.

Folding his body into a chair, he studied the empty glass in his hand, lips pursed as he examined his thoughts.

No doubt the ship's grapevine would be merrily prattling away by now. He smiled wryly. *The Captain's got an old flame, the Captain's Human - aargh, there goes another misconception.* It was rather nice, even now, to throw people a curve or two. Counselor Troi would haunt him for a while, of course. Unobtrusively. He sighed softly. He was well aware that he bottled up his emotions, but often it was necessary. After so many years of practice, he was unlikely to change. She would be watching him, though. Watching him watching Jenice watching Mannheim, all aware and unable to put words to the undercurrents between them. Fate could be cruel sometimes.

The music had ended. He had been subliminally aware of it; the sweeping emotional chords of the trio had counterpointed his mood. Did Jenice know what he felt? Was she at this moment reminiscing over lost years and faded visions? No. Far more likely that she was with the man she married, the man she gave her love to. What right did he, Jean-Luc, have to interfere, to invade what was theirs? Yet was that not what Paul Mannheim asked of him? *Take care of her for me* - as if they were old friends instead of two strangers linked by a single woman.

Was he that transparent?

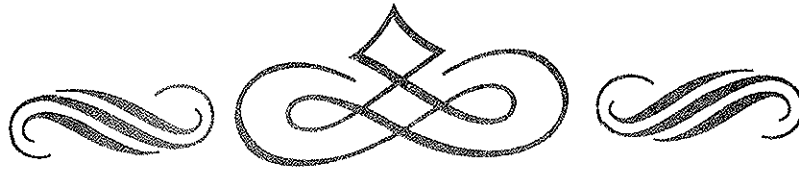
Only to me.

Her words, soft and understanding, bespoke the trust between them. He had not let anyone know him so closely, before her or after.

Curious, he wondered what she had told Mannheim about him. Not that it mattered. That Picard was gone, changed by his experiences into a different man. Or so he preferred to imagine. She could still read him. Perhaps some things did not change after all.

He let loose a sigh composed of all the hope and bittersweet memory stirred by Jenice's arrival. The chronometer on his desk said it was time; time to act, time to send Data down to an unknown fate, time to deal with the present and place the past back into its context.

With faint regret, Picard closed the door on what had been and left his cabin to face what was.



BROTHER OF MINE

by

J Schmidt

She looked at him with hate in her eyes.

"Where is your father?"

"I don't know what you are talking about." She was denying everything.

"Tell me," he said, trying to coax the information out of her.

"I'm leaving now." She got up from the chair where she'd been sitting.

"I'm sorry, I can't let you do that just yet."

She looked at him. "Who's going to stop me? You?" She laughed. *It could be fun to watch him try and stop me*, she thought.

"I won't harm him," he promised.

"For the last time, I don't know where he is," she said firmly.

"You must do." He didn't believe anything she said.

"I'm telling you the truth." She wasn't.

"In that case you can stay here until he comes looking for you."

"He won't do that." She knew her father a lot better than he did. Her father wouldn't risk it.

"Why not?" It would be interesting to hear her explanation.

"How can he? He doesn't know where I am." She smiled.

He stormed out of the room. She had him over a barrel. Still, he could wait it out. There had to be some way of getting her father to come for her.

She sat back in the chair, stretched and smiled. Why *he* was playing these games she didn't understand, especially when her father was right under his nose. Still, he didn't know that. *It was*, she thought, *about the only advantage that they had over him*. There wasn't a lot that he could actually do to her to get the information that he needed; force really wasn't his style at all.

He thought over what she had said. Something was wrong... by now she should have been more than willing to give him what he needed. For years they had said that Soong was dead. Now he had proof that Soong was still alive - but where? That was the final piece of the puzzle. Only when he produced Soong at the Academy would they take back everything that they had said.

.

He waited for her to arrive. She wasn't usually this late without letting him know. Something was wrong - had he got to her at last? He started to walk towards the transporter station. They were due to attend the conference; it would be the first time that they had been together in a long time. She would, if she could, join him later, he knew that for certain.

He re-entered the room where she was sitting. "You can go now."

"Really?" she said in mock surprise. "I intend to report your behaviour."

"Who would believe you?" he asked mockingly.

"You'd be surprised how many important friends I have."

He held the door open for her. He would have her followed just to make sure.

As she left the building she looked behind her. *So he's having me followed, is he?* It could turn out to be very interesting.

She went straight to the transporter station and beamed up to the Enterprise. "Has Dr. Collis beamed up yet?" She was worried that they had got to him.

"Yes. You are?"

"I am Dr. Meyer. Which way do I go?" she asked.

"Someone will be along in a few minutes to escort you to your room."

She smiled at him, then she heard doors opening behind her.

"This way, please, Doctor." She followed her guide.

As they walked down the corridor towards her room she spotted several people that she knew. They stopped outside a room.

"Here you are, Doctor. Now if you will excuse me?"

"Is Dr. Collis' room close by?" she asked him.

"Three doors down." He pointed in the direction she had to go.

"Thank you so much." As soon as he had gone she dropped her bags off in her room. Then she headed towards her father's room. She waited outside until he opened the door.

"Come in."

"Sorry I got delayed," she said.

"Why didn't you let me know?" Dr. Collis looked at her.

"He had me." She could see the worried look on his face. "I didn't tell him anything, so he had to let me go."

Her father walked across the room and hugged her.

"He's got someone following me."

He just looked at her. "Don't worry. So far we've been at least one step ahead of him."

"This can't go on for much longer." She knew that what her father had said was true. "So who do we know on board?" She tried changing the mood.

"There's Commander Maddox."

"Good old Brucie boy."

Dr. Collis looked at her, shocked. "Mind your manners on this trip."

"So what about *him*, then?" she wanted to know.

"Who?" he said, trying to look innocent.

"The mystery man, of course." She waited for him to say something.

"You are to have nothing to do with him." Her father frowned at her.

"The past will catch up with you soon."

"When it does, I will decide what to do - not you."

Dr. Meyer knew then that she would have to let the subject alone - at least for the time being. "Back to our friends." She knew that most of the people they knew were travelling on other ships.

"There are three Vulcans I worked with before." Most of the people he had to avoid were those he had known before. That one small word seemed to dominate his life.

"Avoid them. Tell them you're either busy or ill." She always had to make up excuses for him.

"And if they send a doctor?"

"It's something that you ate." It was her favourite excuse.

"You expect them to believe that?" He looked at her.

"Usually works on Bruce," she laughed.

"Why don't you like him?" *Maddox*, thought her father, *is a nice young man. A bit impetuous at times - but then, who isn't?*

"Declaring your work Starfleet property wasn't exactly a nice thing to do, was it?" She didn't like talking about Bruce Maddox at all.

"It was settled in the end."

"Only after a legal battle. He's going to want to know why you didn't help." She knew that this was a touchy subject with her

father, but sometimes he was just impossible to get through to.

"I couldn't."

"They must know by now that it wasn't your fault!" The tone of her voice was starting to rise.

"I created him, therefore I was responsible."

Why is he still feeling guilty after so long? It has to be, she decided, his great sense of responsibility.

"So if I killed someone it would be your fault, because you created me?" she said.

"That is an entirely different matter altogether." *Why can't she just let it go?*

"Why? Because I wasn't created in the same way?"

"Yes," he replied.

"I've read your papers often enough to know what you were trying to do."

They were both as stubborn as each other.

"I just can't get through to you, can I? I've still got to unpack."

She left his room wishing that she'd never argued with him. It didn't matter what had happened in the past; all that did matter was the fact that it should be his decision to go public. She was ready for the final outcome whichever way it went. To force him to go public wouldn't do anyone any good, especially him. Why hadn't he given himself up long ago? She didn't know. Still, not everyone thought the same way her father did. It would have been pretty boring if they did.

As the door to her room opened she noticed someone watching her. He walked towards him.

"Dr. Meyer."

She turned to see who it was. "Commander Maddox."

"Bruce, please." Maddox smiled at her.

"How is your work going? No more legal battles, I hope?"

"I was just going to visit Dr. Collis." *Why is she being so hostile?*

"He's in a bad mood." She knew that her father wouldn't like to be disturbed.

"In that case, would you care to have dinner with me?"

She looked at him. *What is he playing at?* "It depends," she said.

"Obviously. If you will allow me." He took hold of her arm.

"Always the gentleman, aren't you?"

He said nothing. She thought more about the argument that she had had with her father. "Where are we going?" she asked cautiously.

"A reception that the Captain is giving."

"I'm not dressed properly." She tried to think of a good excuse to get out of it.

"Get changed if it will make you feel better."

"You'll wait outside." She didn't trust him.

"Of course." *She can't get out of it now*, he thought.

"Five minutes." She ran back towards her room. Her bags were still on the bed where she had left them. She opened the first one she came to; there had to be something suitable in it. Quickly she found what she was looking for.

When she came out of her room, Maddox was propped up against the door frame. "Ready now?" he asked her.

"I hate getting dressed up," she replied.

"You didn't feel right before?"

"I've got to keep up appearances." *Why is he smiling?*

"Anything you wear looks fine." Maybe he could use flattery.

She tried to think of ways to change the subject. "I wouldn't mind working on a ship like this," she said, hoping that it would put him off track.

"They take families."

"So all I have to do is have a couple of children, then I can wander round the universe."

"I could help you," he said innocently.

"What???" She looked at him, wondering if she had misheard him.

"To get posted."

"And the children?" She wondered if he dared reply to that.

"I could help with that as well."

The nerve of him! she thought. "Not being the gentleman now, are you?"

"Everyone is allowed a lapse now and then."

She laughed at that, then reminded him, "The reception?"

"Just remember who you arrived with." Maddox knew what she could be like.

"Of course." As if she was going to forget that. She was starting to realise that he wasn't so stuffy when he was away from his work. In fact he could be quite charming if he wanted to be.

When they arrived at the reception, her father was already there. *How did he get here before of us?* She went over to him.

"Dr. Collis! I didn't think you were invited." The person she had just spoken to turned round, and she realised her mistake. "Please forgive me. I thought you were someone else."

"Lisa," Maddox interrupted, "May I introduce you to Lt. Commander Data."

"Sir." She smiled at Data even though she knew that she wouldn't get a reaction.

"Who did you think Data was?" Maddox thought he had heard the name she had used, but wanted to be sure.

"Dr. Collis." She blushed.

"Dr. Collis is here now." She looked over to the door, where Maddox was indicating. Her father had just arrived; he saw who she was talking to and decided to go over.

"Bruce! I hope that you are taking good care of Lisa."

"She thought that Data was you." Maddox waited to see his reaction.

"Really? Lisa has been working too hard lately." He said nothing more, as if that one sentence explained everything. He turned away and left her standing talking to Data and Maddox. *What was she telling them? It would be his decision to go public. She should know better than to try to force the issue!* The problem, as he saw, was the fact that they were too much alike. All he wanted was for her to be happy. *At least she seems to be getting on better with Bruce Maddox. Bruce has some good ideas, but he's nowhere near solving the problem of the neural pathways!* If and when he decided to go public, he would ask Maddox to work with him.

As they stood talking she couldn't she couldn't help but notice that they were so alike. Now she knew who Data was modelled on! Did Data suspect anything? There was something in his manner that suggested that he was innocent.

"Can I get you a drink, Lisa?" Maddox knew that she was thinking about something, but what?

"Sorry. A fruit juice, please, Commander." She had to keep things on a professional level. There was no point in encouraging him; once he found out, all he would be interested in would be her father's work. She looked around the room. What would they all think later? She could just imagine some of their reactions. "Lt. Commander, I understand that you and Commander Maddox had a... a disagreement?"

"That is one way to describe it," Data said.

"He's still a long way off the final solution, though." She was tempted to reveal everything that she knew.

"He will solve the problem."

"Or someone else will." Before she could continue, Maddox interrupted her.

"Lisa." He held out a glass. She took it from him.

"And what were you talking about?" he asked.

"Your work," she replied, trying not to sound as if it was anything important.

"Oh, that." He sounded surprised.

"If you need any advice, just ask away."

"Really? And what would you know about my work?"

"A great deal more than you will ever know. If you gentlemen will excuse me." She liked the look of bafflement on his face; it suited him.

"Don't leave without me?" he said.

"As if I would." Why was he bothering with her now? He'd had plenty of chances in the past, but he'd always been so wrapped up in his work. Maybe now that he was learning to unwind she might give him another chance. But she would have to do it soon.

She felt someone by her side.

"Doctor... ?"

"Meyer. Sorry - I was just thinking." She looked to see who was speaking.

"I'm Captain Picard."

"You certainly have a wonderful ship, Captain." *Flattery will get you everywhere*, she told herself.

"Dr. Collis was telling me about your dislike of Commander Maddox."

"Oh. That's all in the past now." Had she said the right thing? She thought for a moment, then reconsidered. "I think that his brush with you taught him something important." She saw the look on Picard's face and knew she had said the right thing.

"And what did I teach him?" Picard asked.

"Humility. He thinks first now. If he causes you any more problems, just let me know." She knew that she could handle Maddox if it came to it. She saw the look of surprise on his face.

"I will bear that in mind. If you will excuse me..."

"Of course." She looked around the room to see who else she

could talk to. There were very few people there that she knew, and they weren't very interesting. It was always the same at this type of gathering. No-one gave anything away, either about their work or themselves. Maybe she could slip away without being spotted by Bruce.

She waited until a group of people came into the room, then she slipped out, casting a quick look back to see if Maddox was following her. He was. He certainly had perseverance! She stopped and headed back to him.

"What do you want?" she asked, already knowing what his answer would be.

"I thought that you were going to wait for me."

"Who gave you that idea?"

"You did." He looked at her.

"I felt tired."

"Are you sure it wasn't something you ate?"

"Quite sure. Now if you will excuse me... " *I will have to think of a better excuse in the future; he knows my usual excuse too well by now,* she thought.

"Why don't I escort you to your room?" Maddox suggested.

She just stared at him for a moment. "Amazing - I don't feel tired at all now."

"Trying to avoid me again?"

She smiled. "Commander... "

"Please call me Bruce."

"I really should be going now." Anything to change the subject.

"Where to?"

"My room." What was he up to? "I've still got to unpack."

"The reception's boring," he said.

"In that case find something more exciting to do. You can always try to disassemble Data again." She hadn't meant to say that, only it came out on its own. She could tell that she had hurt him. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Forgive me. Please."

"I'm going back to the reception." He turned abruptly and headed back the way he had come. She waited where she was for a few minutes. Then she heard music coming from the room. Cautiously she re-entered. People were dancing.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" It was Picard.

"I just needed to be on my own for a while."

"This was Commander Maddox's idea." Picard gestured at the

dancers.

"The nerve of that man!" Well, at least he hadn't taken her suggestion seriously.

Just then a hand grabbed hold of her arm.

"What the - ?"

"Care to dance, Doctor?" It was Maddox.

"Will you release me now, Commander." She was angry; he had no right to touch her!

"And if I don't?" he asked.

"I will scream." She meant it.

"People are looking at you." He knew that she hated to cause scenes.

"Well... just one dance."

It felt strange, dancing with him. She hadn't even known that he *could* dance. The music finished.

"Another dance?"

"Well... " She thought about it.

"I won't force you."

"All right." It certainly wouldn't do any harm. She noticed that her father was watching them. She needed to talk to Data again. He certainly wasn't what she had expected. Everything about him reminded her of her father when they were at home. At times she missed being with the rest of her family. Still, it had been her decision to accompany him.

The music stopped again. "If you will excuse me, Bruce."

"Certainly." *She's softening towards me*, he thought.

She saw her father talking to Data, and tried to think of a way to interrupt them. "Dr. Collis - how are you feeling?"

He looked at her. "Better." *Why is she bringing the illness up now?*

"You're lying."

Data looked at her. Humans were such strange beings! At times he wondered if he would ever fully understand them.

"Lisa, this is neither the time nor the place to discuss this matter," Collis continued.

"When will it be time?" she demanded.

"Later."

"Later? It may be too late then." The only way she could sort things out now was to keep pushing him.

"Perhaps you will dance with me?" He escorted her to the dance floor.

Why did it have to happen now, especially when he was so close to making a decision? *Still, these things are sent to test us*, she thought, but it all seemed so unfair. Did he think that it was some kind of punishment for what had happened in the past? She tried to put it to the back of her mind, but couldn't. There was still so much that needed to be sorted out.

"This may be the last chance that I have to do this," she murmured.

"Don't talk like that," he said.

"Sorry." She really was, but she had to face up to facts.

"There is no need to be. We both know what will happen eventually."

The last time. It was such a soul-destroying phrase! But that was the truth behind the illness. If only there was a cure... but there wasn't.

"Lisa?"

"Yes?" She looked at him; he was smiling.

"Forget about it."

"I'm trying - but - "

"For me, try harder."

How could she? "I don't feel like dancing any more." She left him standing there.

As Lisa Meyer walked back to her room she couldn't help thinking about Dr. Collis. Whatever happened was meant to be, and there was nothing that either of them could do to change that fact.

Picard wandered around the room. *Things are certainly different at this gathering*, he thought to himself. He noticed that Dr. Collis was looking pale; then he collapsed. Picard called for a medical team immediately.

Dr. Meyer had just reached her room when Maddox appeared.
"Lisa - it's Dr. Collis."

"What? Where is he?" Already she knew it might be too late.

"Sickbay." Why was she getting so upset?

"Where's that?" she demanded urgently.

"Come with me."

"Hurry - he's dying!" She followed him; when they reached sickbay she took one look at Collis and realised that it was too

late.

No need for secrecy now. "Father." Maddox looked at her.

"Lisa... Tell Data I'm sorry."

She looked round. "Get Data here now!"

Crusher looked at her. What Data could do was beyond her, yet there was obviously a reason for the request.

Data arrived a few minutes later. "Dr. Collis?"

"My son, it's been a long time. I never forgot about you."

Maddox took Lisa to one side. "What's he taking about? He doesn't know what he's saying!"

"He does!" she replied angrily.

"Lisa... " Her father closed his eyes and she knew it was for the last time.

"I couldn't do anything," Crusher said.

"There wasn't anything anyone could have done, it was incurable." She turned to Data. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way. For years I tried to get him to accept that people wouldn't blame him for what Lore did." She gave him a faint smile. "He loved us all equally."

MY DAUGHTER OR DATA ?

She looks up at me,
her pale face worried.
"I can't sneeze" she says.
"Atishoo ! Atishoo !"
Puzzled, she tries once more,
Then shakes her head.

I throw the ball.
She misses.
"Butterfingers !" I tease.
She looks at her hands,
And rushes to the kitchen
To wash them.

She reminds me of Data
And I smile.
But as my Human tornado
Rushes through the house
How I wish two-year-olds
Had off-switches like him!

Jacquie Groom

ACADEMY LEGACY

by

Jacquie Groom

Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise glanced round the briefing room. The assembled key staff looked alert and refreshed after shore-leave. "Finally," he said, "you may experience some minor problems with the computer over the next few days, in the Personnel and Administration areas. A special programmer from Starfleet Admin will be joining us shortly to update the software, and bring us in line with current versions."

Doctor Beverly Crusher looked up, suddenly interested. "Does this have anything to do with the garbled records I've been receiving on personnel joining the ship?"

Picard nodded. "Somehow we've become totally out of phase with the Starbases. Starfleet guarantee Miss Balistra will solve that." He glanced round the faces. "Mr Data, Mr La Forge. Please ensure Miss Balistra has all the help she needs. I would appreciate a quick end to these annoying problems."

"Certainly, sir," Data said, nodding. "Might I suggest that this might be a useful project for Acting Ensign Crusher?"

Picard considered the matter, then nodded. "Agreed. As long as Miss Balistra has no objections. The last thing we want at the moment is problems with Admin." He switched off the display, and dismissed the crew.

Wesley Crusher was behind one of the science desks on the bridge. He looked up as Data and Geordi La Forge approached him. "I've finished the assignment you set me, Data," he said, his young face shining with enthusiasm. "What's next?"

Geordi laughed. "A lesson in diplomacy, my young friend. We've a programmer aboard from Starfleet Admin, and you're to help her update the software."

Wesley looked slightly disgusted. "Why do we need anyone else to mess with our computers? Surely we can do it all ourselves?"

Commander Riker, sitting in the Captain's chair, had overheard. "Wesley," he said. "There is one thing you should learn, and learn fast, if you want a long, trouble-free career in Starfleet." He looked at Geordi, and in unison they chanted. "Don't mess with Admin."

Wesley looked at Data for confirmation. He nodded. "I have not the experience of the other staff with the emotions of frustration and annoyance, but I have certainly noted the delays and minor irritations Admin can cause, when displeased."

"So, Wesley," Geordi concluded. "No showing Miss Balistra

you're ten times the programmer she is. Or rewriting her software. Or she'll find some way of stranding you at the bottom ranks of Starfleet for the rest of your life.

Sandra Balistra was quite content with her latest assignment. She'd spent the last three years working on the updates, and it was a pleasant change to get out and about again. The only problem was the people. If only they would leave her alone, let her do the job and go. But instead they had to meet her at the transporter room, show her around, try and make conversation. Why couldn't they take the hint, that Special Programmer Balistra of Starfleet Admin did not like people, did not need people, and preferred to keep herself to herself!

Computers were different. She liked computers. Generally they did as she asked, they talked to her, helped her. They were her friends. They did not betray, or ask awkward questions. And they definitely did not assign annoying boy geniuses to assist her with her work. She sat down at the terminal, and hoped to get some more work done before Wesley joined her once more. Peace.

Her peace did not last for long. The Chief Medical Officer called by to see if she'd like to go to the recreation lounge. One of the bridge officers asked if she'd like to visit the holodecks. People trying to get on the good side of Admin, as usual. She refused all offers as curtly as she could. With any luck they'd leave her alone soon.

"Data, can I ask you a question?" Wesley looked up from the computer station.

"Of course, Wesley. What is bothering you?"

"It's Miss Balistra. I just don't get her. She's so - "

"Prickly," Geordi filled in. "Bad-tempered, unpleasant. Typical Admin person, I'd say. How else would someone so young and relatively attractive get so bitter."

Data looked puzzled. "I have barely spoken to her. She seemed efficient and intelligent to me."

Wesley grinned. "But you're different, Data. She only likes computers, so she told me. Perhaps she considers you slightly more bearable than the rest of us mere Humans."

Data put his head to one side and considered the matter. "Intriguing," he mused. "I may investigate further."

"Watch out, my friend," Geordi warned. "You might get your head bitten off."

Data felt carefully round his neck. "I do not think her teeth are capable - " he said, stopping short as he realised what had been said. "You mean that figuratively. I will take good care of my head."

.

As Data approached the room where Sandra Balistra was working, he heard a soft voice singing. He scanned his memory banks till he came up with the right word. A lullaby. Someone was singing a lullaby.

He opened the door, and the singing stopped abruptly. Sandra Balistra sprang to her feet. "Lieutenant Commander Data. I did not expect to see anyone this late."

"This is not an official visit, Programmer Balistra," Data said, motioning her to sit down once more. "I simply wanted to assure myself that all was going well."

"The work is nearly finished," she said, running her fingers gracefully over the console. "Acting Ensign Crusher was most helpful."

"Do not let me disturb you. You were singing what is known as a lullaby, I believe. A song a mother sings to children." Data watched as a Sandra Balistra's cheeks turned bright red, and she hurriedly turned away.

After a moment or two, she turned back to him, her face once more hard and cold. "It helps me to concentrate," she said roughly. "I will stop if it annoys passers-by."

"I did not mean to cause you embarrassment, Programmer Balistra," Data said. "I am simply curious as to why someone would sing to a machine."

Sandra's face softened for a minute. "Please, call me Sandra. They are not machines to me, Commander. They are my friends, my children. Computers are my world. I can trust them." A light flashing on the terminal behind caught her attention. "Excuse me, please. I must get back to my work. Your Captain is impatient to have me out of the way!"

"My name is Data," Data said with his faint smile. "Please continue with your work," he said, moving towards the door. "It has been most interesting talking to you. Would you object if I returned tomorrow?"

Wesley Crusher would have been most surprised to see the slight smile on Sandra's usually stern face. "No, Data," she said. "I would not mind at all."

"So, you went into the dragon's lair?" Geordi La Forge stood in the doorway to Data's quarters.

"Dragon? No, I have seen no dragons, Geordi." Data looked puzzled.

"Data, he means Special Programmer Balistra," Wesley said, from the terminal where he sat.

"Oh, you mean dragon as in a fierce person, an ogre, someone who scares. Sandra does not appear to me in that light at all. In fact, she seems quite sad."

Wesley pulled a face. "Sandra? The dragon programmer has a name! You've got a strange taste in women, Data."

"And what's this about her being sad? You'll be setting yourself up as Counselor next. Perhaps we should warn Counselor Troi that she has competition, Wesley," Geordi teased.

Data, however, seemed distant. "I find her most intriguing. There is some mystery about her, I am sure. Perhaps it is time to try out my deductive capacities once more."

Collectively, Wesley and Geordi sighed.

It drifted out in the deep, uncharted areas of space. Lonely, tired, it had not met one of its own kind for many turns of the galaxy. It felt old and weary, and longed for a place to rest. Sparkling faintly, it gathered what strength it had left to propel itself towards the approaching spacecraft. Perhaps this could be its relief. Its saviour.

"Sandra? You are still working?"

Sandra looked up from the terminal. Her hair was dishevelled, and her eyes looked weary. Still, she forced a smile. "Yes, Data. I've encountered a few slight problems, and decided to continue until they were ironed out."

"Ironed out?"

"It's an expression. To - "

Data interrupted. "I see. To iron out. To solve, smooth over, eliminate ..."

Sandra smiled again. "As you say. Well, you can inform your Captain that his personnel files are in perfect condition once more. And fully compatible with all Starbase software."

"He will be glad to hear that, I am sure, but not so glad as Dr. Crusher or Counselor Troi. They are more personally involved with those functions. And the Admin files?"

"Give me a chance!" Sandra turned back to her terminal. "Data? Did you know Tasha Yar?"

Tasha Yar. Data's memory banks instantly recalled her picture. "Yes, I knew Tasha. She was a good friend. She is greatly missed. Why do you ask? Did you know Tasha?"

Sandra sighed. "A long time ago. We were friends at Starfleet Academy."

Once again Data's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Starfleet Academy? I did not know you were a student there."

"It was all I ever wanted." She smiled, reminiscent. "I reached for the stars. I dreamed of navigating, of my own ship." Her smile faded as she continued. "But I was only there one year. Then they asked me to leave. And Admin offered me the programming position. And that's what I've been doing ever since. But I still wonder what it would have been like to have succeeded." She got up and wandered round the room, checking some of the equipment. "I

always checked up on Tasha, followed her career. One of the perks of working for Personnel. It was quite a shock to hear of her death."

Data looked solemn. "It was a great shock to us all."

"Still, at least she got to do what she wanted. Even if only for a while, her dream came true." For a moment Sandra looked as if she would cry. Data searched his memory for the most comforting thing to say, but before he had time to respond he noticed that Sandra's face was once more calm and composed. He tried a different tactic. "Would you care to join me in the Ten-Forward lounge? Some of my friends are there - "

Sandra cut him off. "No, thank you. I prefer to keep to myself. I don't get along with people."

"You seem to get along with me," Data remarked.

Sandra smiled. "You're different, Data. And I don't just mean because you're an android."

"I believe you would like some of my colleagues if you would give them a chance," Data continued, but Sandra shook her head.

"And submit them to the company of the Dragon Programmer? Yes, I know what Wesley calls me. No thanks. Incidentally," she said, returning to her work, "that boy is brilliant. And has been most restrained. I can see him itching to alter my work a dozen times an hour."

"Yes, we have high hopes for Wesley. Goodnight, Sandra."

Instead of going straight to Ten-Forward, Data went to his quarters, and asked the computer for access to Starfleet Academy records. A short while later he left to join his friends in Ten-Forward, a puzzled look on his face.

"Geordi? How would you have felt if, in spite of satisfactory results, you'd been forced to leave Starfleet Academy after one year?"

Geordi looked up, surprised. "I'd have been shattered. Plenty of people did fail, though."

"Do you know what reasons were given for that failure?"

"Reasons? What reasons do they need to kick you out? It's something I thought about as little as possible! Failing courses, I suppose. Or Psych problems. If the profile was wrong, no amount of brilliance would keep someone in."

"But if someone was doing well at all classes, in the top five of the year, and all profiles were clean? What reasons would there be to remove them from the Academy?" Data continued. Geordi looked blank. Will Riker, however, looked up from his glass of synthehol.

"Reminds me of stories I heard back when I was a new student. Tales of powerful people stealing away students with special skills. Poaching for industry. Or even other branches of Starfleet. Nothing was ever confirmed, and the rumours died down.

Why the questioning, Data?"

"Just curiosity, Commander," Data replied. But his face remained thoughtful, and he resolved to talk to the Captain the next day.

"Commander Riker? " Acting Ensign Crusher activated his combadge, and called the bridge. "Programmer Balistra needs to shut down the Administration module of the computer for essential maintenance."

Riker turned to Data, who nodded. "It will not take long," he commented."

"Understood, Mr Crusher," Riker responded to the call. "You may tell Miss Balistra that she can proceed."

"Yes, Commander. Out."

It drifted towards the ship, realising sadly that this was not the friend it longed for. Still, there was no reason to avoid the object in its path. It spread itself as thinly as possible, and prepared to glide through the Enterprise.

"Captain? The scanners have picked up an unidentified energy source." Commander Riker's voice sounded through the combadge.

"Picking up readings," Data confirmed from the science console.

"Visual?" Picard barked as he emerged from his ready room.

"No, sir. It does not appear to register visually."

"Get Lt. La Forge to the Bridge immediately."

Suddenly Lt. Worf burst into life. "Security Alert. Possible intruder." He checked his console, then yelled, "Security team to levels 8 and 9! Quick!" The Klingon seemed to relish the chance of action after long, routine days. Then his face fell. "Alert ceased, Captain. Situation normal."

Data turned round from his desk. "Confirmed, Captain. The energy source has disappeared."

"Dissipated, you mean?"

Data considered the question, then shook his head. "No, disappeared. Vanished. Gone. As if it was never there."

Commander Riker got up from the Captain's side, and inspected Data's console. He shrugged his shoulders. "Could this be a side effect of the computer problems?"

Data shook his head. "The updates to Admin and Personnel records should have no effect on the general running of the ship. They are independent subsystems and as such can be taken up and down

as necessary for repair and/or maintenance - "

"Thank you, Mr Data," Picard interrupted. "We will take your word for it."

"Miss Balistra is working on level 8," Worf interjected. "Where the intruder alert sounded."

Picard looked thoughtful. "Mr Data, check it out," he said.

As Data approached Sandra's work room, he became aware of a strange noise. He adjusted his hearing to try and distinguish the sound. Puzzled, he activated his combadge. "Lieutenant Data to Security? Request backup at Computer Center, level 8. I am unable to identify the sound emanating from Programmer Balistra's work room."

In no time at all, Worf was with him, cautiously opening the door. Data blinked. The sight inside was strange indeed. For in the room stood Sandra Balistra and Wesley Crusher, in each other's arms, crying as if their hearts would break.

Sandra Balistra looked uncomfortable. She sat on the bed in Sickbay, wiping her eyes, and desperately trying to work out what had come over her. She sniffed, and smiled up at Dr. Crusher, who had just walked in with Counselor Troi and the Captain. "I don't normally cry like that," she admitted.

"Neither does Wesley. What brought it on?"

Sandra shook her head slowly. "I don't know. We'd switched everything off, and made some minor adjustments. Then Red Alert sounded, and Wesley wanted to stop in case he was required on the bridge. So we switched the power back on. The next thing I knew - well, it was as if a wave of sadness hit me. I felt so dreadfully sad, I just couldn't help myself. I cried. Wesley seemed to be in the same state. And then Data found us."

"Were you crying over anything in particular? Sad memories, personal losses, tragedies?" Counselor Troi's calm, slightly accented voice cut in.

Sandra looked up at the glamorous half-Betazoid. "No, nothing like that. I wasn't crying about anything. I just felt sad. Terribly sad. For no real reason."

Deanna Troi looked at Beverly Crusher. "Wesley confirms that."

Picard looked round. "We must assume this has something to do with the intruder alert, even if it was immediately cancelled. Lieutenant Worf?" He hit his combadge. "Any progress on the intruder?"

The Klingon officer's gruff voice echoed through Sickbay. "Negative, Captain. Security has the area sealed off, as a precautionary measure."

"Data? Can you add anything?"

Data, who had returned to the bridge after summoning the Doctor, said. "There was a definite raising of power levels in Computer Room Level 8 just as I lost readings on the long-range scanners. I believe we must conclude we have some being on board, and it has caused this unexpected result."

Deanna Troi looked intently at the Captain. "I think I should go to the Computer Center," she said, "to see if I can sense anything. That is, after all, my job."

"Deanna, do you think you should? If whatever it is had this sort of effect on Sandra and Wesley, what could it do to you?"

"I do not know. But I believe I must make the attempt."

Time seemed to drag interminably for Jean-Luc Picard, as he paced round his ready room. His combadge squeaked, and he was almost annoyed to hear Beverly Crusher's efficient voice ring out. "Sickbay reporting to Picard," she said. "Captain, I must report a worsening of the situation."

"What? Sandra and Wesley?"

"No, they are fine. But we have reports of twenty-six crew members collapsing in near hysterics. Uncontrollable grief, just like the others."

"What were these people doing?"

"Just working on the computer, as far as I can tell. Predominantly administrative workers."

"Thank you, Dr. Crusher. Keep me informed." Picard resumed his pacing. Why didn't they get in touch? What was going on down there?

"Wesley? Wait a moment?" Sandra, on her way out of Sickbay, ran to catch up with the teenager.

"Yes, Miss Balistra?" Wesley stopped. He looked puzzled, and slightly embarrassed.

"Wesley, I just wanted to say..." She stopped, and looked away, blushing slightly. "It's hard to stay aloof from someone when you've just spent ten minutes crying your eyes out in their arms."

Wesley looked at her. "Yes, Miss Balistra?" he repeated.

"Wesley, I'm trying to say I'm sorry. It's not something I'm very good at. Just like I'm not very good with people. I've avoided them for years. After a while, it becomes a habit." She smiled at him. "I also wanted to say that it has been interesting working with you. You're ten times the programmer I'll ever be. So," she put a guiding hand on his shoulder, "take my advice. Never, ever let Starfleet Admin get their hands on you. Whatever you do, don't end up like me."

She patted his shoulder, turned, and walked briskly down the corridor. Wesley was left staring after her. "Miss Balistra," he

called, "I rather like dragons, you know?"

Captain Picard was just about to defy his Security Chief's instructions and go down to level 8 when Counselor Troi and Data reported back to the ready room. To his surprise, Deanna seemed calm and collected. He had been prepared for anything but this - the sensitive half-Betazoid was usually worse hit than anyone when emotions came into play. "Well?" he said.

"There is definitely an alien being of some sort there, Captain," Data said. "As far as we can ascertain, it is now resident in the Administration/Personnel module of the computer system. We believe it was simply passing through the ship, when the computer was re-activated, and somehow trapped it."

"You were able to make contact with it, then, Troi?"

She nodded. "Captain, it is extraordinary. I have never encountered anything like it before. The best way I could describe it would be as an anti-empath. It - it broadcasts feelings. Feelings of terrible, indescribable sadness. But the creature itself is not sad. Behind the transmissions I was aware of great contentment. It appears to like its new surroundings, even if they were not intentional."

Data continued. "This broadcast emotion would appear to be some sort of defense mechanism. The being, whatever it is, protects itself by reducing all who come into contact with it to tears."

"All non-telepaths, that is," Picard murmured.

A faint smile played on Deanna's lips. "It is the first, and I am sure the only time, that I have seen Lieutenant Worf close to tears."

Picard blinked, finding this hard to believe. "But he didn't cry?"

"No, he removed himself abruptly. But it was a close thing."

Warming to his subject, Data carried on. "It could be compared to a skunk, keeping possible enemies away by smell. Or plants, by chemical reactions. The phenomenon is not unknown in other species."

Picard waved impatiently. "Point taken, Data. We are prevented from getting rid of it, because we cannot get near it. But, really, Data, I can't have the whole crew dissolving in tears. I would be the laughing stock of the galaxy."

Data gave his faint smile. "I do not believe that will be necessary, Captain. If that module of the computer is turned off, links to the other modules temporarily severed, and the memory cleared, we believe the being will move on, in search of some more hospitable place."

Deanna nodded. "I sense a great need for its own kind. It seems to be on some sort of quest. It welcomes the enforced rest, but will not linger."

"Will simply shutting the power to the module suffice?" Picard

was clutching at straws.

Data shook his head. "Sorry, Captain. I believe it is emmeshed in the programmes themselves."

"But that means..."

"Yes, Captain. It will mean that the Personnel and Administration files will have to be redone. Completely."

Jean-Luc Picard sighed. "Well, I suppose it's a good thing Sandra Balistra is still with us. Make it so, Commander Data."

The thing wondered where all the warmth had gone. What had happened to its new nest, its perfect den? Slowly it willed itself to move from the center of what had been a whirling collection of data. Gathering itself up, it slipped out through the ship's walls as easily as it had got it. And floated off, refreshed and warmed, but still in search of the rest of its kind. Some day it would find them.

Picard switched on his display, and called up the Admin files. "Excellent," he said to Data, hovering above him. "This all seems to be in order. Is Programmer Balistra ready to leave? I would like to thank her for her work."

"She is preparing to leave on the next shuttle. But, Captain, I would like to ask a favour of you. Would you take a look at these files?"

Picard raised his eloquent eyebrows, but he glanced over the screen of information Data had called up for him. "First year Academy Records," he said. "Quite satisfactory." He scrolled back to find the student's name, then looked round at Data. "These are Sandra Balistra's records?" he asked, puzzled.

"Precisely, Sir. It does not make sense. There is no reason, academic, psychic or disciplinarian, why Sandra was requested to leave Starfleet Academy at the end of her first year. Captain, if I could have your permission, I would like to investigate further."

"Certainly. But, Data, might I ask why you are doing this?"

Data put his head to one side, clearly accessing some internal processors. "She was a friend of Tasha's. I believe this is what she would have wanted me to do. And..."

"And?"

Data gave his faint smile. "She is the first person I have met who has truly preferred me to my Human colleagues. She talked to me as she has not done to anyone for years. I was - touched - by that."

As Data turned and left the room, Jean-Luc Picard found himself smiling. His android officer's capacity for emotion seemed to grow day by day. He could see why Sandra Balistra had chosen him as confidant.

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Sandra Balistra, looking shy but radiant, sat at a table in Ten-Forward. She was supposed to meet her new friends there for a farewell drink. As Data entered, she looked up at him, beaming with happiness.

Geordi put an arm round her. "Well, how does it feel to have passed year one at the Academy?" he teased.

"Just wonderful. But I still can't believe it. If Data hadn't personally shown me those records - "

Commander Riker pulled up a chair. "I found it hard to believe too. I knew Admin was powerful, but to go to the length of forcing Starfleet Academy to fail students that they wanted to recruit ..."

Geordi shuddered. "It makes you think, doesn't it? It could have been any of us. And in the flat despair of failing, I bet anyone would accept any offer that came their way."

Wesley Crusher looked up at Sandra. He'd been working closely with her over the past few days, and had grown to like her, once he got past the prickles. "What'll you do now, Dragon?" he teased. "Go back to the Academy and graduate?"

"And be the oldest second-year student in living memory? No, thanks. Besides, I've got a job, and I'm good at it. Hopefully I can continue working in space. And now I don't have to hate anyone in Starfleet uniform." She took Data's hand in hers. "Thanks to you, Data. My childhood dreams will never come true, but at least now I know they could have done." She planted a shy kiss on his cheek, then sat back, her face glowing.

It was some time later, when they arrived at Starbase 43, that Data was called to the transporter room to take delivery of a large box. He took it to Ten-Forward, and opened it there.

"A dragon?" Deanna exclaimed on seeing the statue. "How exquisite. Where did you get this, Data?"

Wesley smiled at his friend. "I bet Sandra sent it, didn't she?" he teased.

"Indeed, Wesley." He stretched out in one of the chairs. "It is good to know my investigative work can have such good results."

Geordi smiled at him. "What you mean, my friend, is that it feels good to help someone. And you're right, it does!"



AMBASSADOR ROYAL

by

Ann E. Routley

Princess Anneia looked up from the corner of the cell in which she was huddled as the two Ferengi guards entered. She shrank from them, her normally indomitable spirit now considerably cowed by her ill-treatment and half-starvation at their hands. She was acutely aware of her nakedness; the Ferengi, as was their custom with all women, had stripped her of all her clothing. The guards yanked her roughly to her feet and half-dragged her between them to a nearby turbolift.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded, and for answer received from the younger of the guards a sharp cuff across the side of her head, which sent her reeling against the wall

The other guard hissed at him, and they began arguing and shoving each other. Anneia sank down against the wall, only to be dragged to her feet again as the doors opened, revealing the ship's bridge. Still reeling from the stinging blow, Anneia was propelled forward to where the Ferengi Daimon stood, facing the screen. Her heart leapt as she saw the larger-than-life image of a Starfleet Captain in conversation with the Ferengi, but at that moment the guard behind her shoved her hard in the back, and she fell sprawling at the Chief's feet.

Too frightened and too dazed to do more than lie where she had fallen, Princess Anneia tried to focus on the voices above her head, the one cool and clear, conceding no ground; the other sibilant and threatening. She heard the word 'Stargazer', and lifted her head to look at the Starfleet Captain standing erect and inscrutable before the screen. With a peculiar detachment, she realised that it was her own life over which they were negotiating. She tried to sit up, but one of the guards put his boot between her shoulder blades and forced her down again, uncoiling the whip at his belt as he did so. The Daimon's arm shot out and motioned him away.

"Very well, Picard," the Ferengi hissed, leaning closer to the screen. "We agree terms. She is yours."

On the bridge of the Enterprise, the ugly image of the Ferengi Chief disappeared, and Captain Jean-Luc Picard wheeled round and headed for the turbolift.

"Captain Picard to Dr. Crusher. Transporter Room 3, immediately. Medical emergency." As he entered the lift, he shot over his shoulder, "Get us out of here, No. 1."

"Aye sir," responded William Riker, and took the command chair.

The young engineer looked up from his console as Captain Picard

and Counselor Troi entered the transporter room. At the same moment the beam in front of them shimmered, and the thin form of Princess Anneia materialized. She sank into a heap, and Picard rushed forward. Gently he lifted the girl to her feet, and enfolded her in a robe he had collected from his quarters on the way down. Her eyes opened momentarily as she sensed the strength and compassion in the arms now supporting her - the first touch of kindness in many weeks. Then her head lolled back and she blacked out completely. The Captain lifted her gently in his arms, and nodding to CMO Beverly Crusher who had just joined them, hastened to the sickbay.

Captain Picard laid the girl carefully on the diagnostic couch, and stood back as Dr. Crusher lowered the canopy over her. He stood watching, his arms folded across his chest, as the Doctor did a preliminary scan.

"Report, Dr. Crusher?"

"Considerable bruising - and two cracked ribs. But I don't detect any internal damage, sir."

"Good." And then, almost to himself, "But what else has she suffered at their hands...?"

He turned and looked at Deanna Troi, who came forward. The Counselor gasped, as the Betazoid in her reached out and touched Anneia's distress and grief, and Picard reached out to steady her.

"Oh Captain, I feel pain - much pain." The dark eyes that met his were full of compassion. "I sense..." She paused, her eyes closed. "Fear. And pain. But more than that... death," she said finally. "She has lost many she loved."

"Ferengi dogs!" Picard spat out, and Beverly looked up from her ministrations into the Captain's face. At that moment the Captain's combadge chattered.

"First Officer to Captain."

"Yes, Riker?"

"Need you on the bridge, sir."

"Coming, No. 1."

With a nod to Beverly, and a last look at the bruised form lying sedated on the couch, Picard turned on his heel and left the sickbay.

The Captain emerged from the turbolift and strode onto the bridge. Will Riker vacated the command chair and Picard sat down.

"Status, Commander?"

"Sir, we've picked up a distress call; we're just about to make visual contact."

"On screen, please, Mr. Data."

"Aye, sir." The android keyed in the co-ordinates and suddenly a face appeared on the screen, flickered, and then cleared.

"...appealing to Starfleet for assistance."

The Captain stood and walked forward.

"This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the U.S.S. Enterprise. Please identify yourself."

The man on the screen visibly relaxed. He was, Picard judged, ten or fifteen years his senior, but his posture was erect, his bearing regal.

"Captain Picard. I greet you. I am King P'lek of Chautara."

The Captain looked across at the Ops desk; Data was already accessing information on his console.

"Five weeks ago, Captain, my daughter Anneia left our planet bound for Starbase 68. She went as my ambassador to request of Starfleet that Chautara be linked to the Federation."

Data turned in his chair. "Chautara: Class M planet in the Beta Selsey IV sector. Constitutional monarchy. Population..."

"Thank you, Mr. Data," the Captain cut in. He stepped forward, as King P'lek continued.

"We lost all contact with my daughter's ship some weeks ago, and I fear for her safety. We are too far from Starbase 68 to communicate directly, and I have been appealing constantly on this frequency in the hope of contacting a Starfleet vessel that could help us locate my daughter."

"The Princess is safe, King P'lek. She is aboard our ship."

"Elyon be praised!" exclaimed the King. "And her crew?"

"That I don't know, Your Majesty, but we will make contact with Starbase 68 and enquire. Stand by on this frequency and we will contact you again."

"I and my people are deeply grateful, Captain Picard."

As soon as King P'lek's image faded from the screen, the Captain turned to Troi.

"I will talk with her as soon as she is conscious, sir."

"Make it so."

The turbolift doors opened, and Troi walked onto the bridge. Captain Picard turned as she approached.

"Tell me, Counselor, how is the Princess?"

"She is recovering well, Captain. Dr. Crusher is pleased with her progress... physically."

The last word was not lost on the Captain, but his present

concern was for King P'lek, and the communication they were about to make with Chautara.

"Starbase 68 was unable to tell us anything," said Data, turning from his station at OPs. "No ships, Federation or otherwise, have passed through their sector for many weeks."

Deanna seated herself next to Picard, and the Captain turned to face her.

"Have you been able to learn anything from the Princess, Deanna?"

"Yes, sir. Now I begin to understand the grief and torment beyond her ill-treatment aboard the Ferengi vessel..."

"The facts, Counselor," cut in Picard.

Troi sat up straighter and gave her report. "The Princess's starcruiser was heading for Starbase 68 on a diplomatic mission to apply for Federation membership for Chautara when they were intercepted by the Ferengi. They were unarmed, and powerless to stop the Ferengi boarding their vessel. It seems they knew the purpose of her journey, and they were hoping to forge an alliance instead between the Ferengi and the Chautarans."

"But why?" queried Picard.

"Sir," interjected Data, "Chautara has rich deposits of natural quihranium."

"Ah," said Picard. "If there's a profit to be made, the Ferengi will travel the length and breadth of the galaxy to secure it." He looked back at Troi, who continued.

"Princess Anneia refused point blank to enter any negotiations with them. Though the Chautarans are a gentle and peaceable race they are obviously no fools, and the Princess wasn't going to have any dealings with aliens she knew would bleed her planet of all its natural resources. She ordered the Ferengi off her ship, at which point they drew their weapons. The Princess was beamed aboard the Ferengi vessel, and told to reconsider her decision. When she refused, she was hauled in front of the viewscreen. The Ferengi Chief turned their photon torpedoes on her ship. Captain, they cold-bloodedly murdered her 15 crew members before her eyes."

"WHAT?" Picard was aghast. He sat back heavily in his seat. "So presumably they were heading for Chautara to bargain with King P'lek, using his daughter as a hostage?"

"Until we intercepted them," put in Riker. "They must have assumed that King P'lek had already requested Starfleet's aid, and in view of the Enterprise's superior fire power, were reluctant to engage us in combat. Instead they traded us the Princess for some of our excess stocks of dilithium crystals, thereby wriggling out of a confrontation without losing face."

"The Ferengi aren't concerned about losing face, Mr. Riker," pointed out Picard. "They're concerned only about losing a profitable deal." Picard sat rubbing his chin, deep in thought.

Deanna Troi cleared her throat. "Sir, the Princess told me these things in a very cold, detached way. I am concerned that she

hasn't acknowledged and embraced her grief." Captain Picard turned his attention back to Counselor Troi. "The difficulty is that her royal upbringing and years of diplomatic training have caused her to suppress her own feelings - to put aside personal grief, and get on with the situation in hand."

"Stiff upper lip?" suggested Picard.

Data's head tilted to one side. "Sir?"

"An expression, Data." He noted the android's quizzical look, but there was no time to explain now.

Data logged it away for later. Geordi would know.

"What do you suggest, Counselor?"

Troi sighed. "She needs to cry, sir. She needs tenderness - and time."

"Make it so, Counselor. I must contact King P'lek." With that, he rose and walked forward to the viewscreen.

The lights in the sickbay were dim. Princess Anneia lay sleeping, but as the effects of Dr. Crusher's sedative wore off, and her own natural sleep pattern took over, the girl began to toss from side to side, images flashing through her mind. The faces of her bridge crew - her friends - seconds before her capture; the ugly face of the Ferengi Chief pressed close to hers, his breath foul and hot on her terrified face, rough hands forcing her to watch as her ship exploded into a million flaming fragments...

"No... No... NO!" she screamed. Commander Riker and Counselor Troi, walking together in the corridor just outside, looked at each other, and then rushed into the room. Riker took Anneia by the shoulders to calm her, but the girl's head still thrashed from side to side, and she continued to scream out in fear. Riker raised his hand to strike her, in the hope of waking her from her nightmare.

"NO!" shouted Troi, grabbing his arm. "You FOOL, Bill!" Riker looked from Deanna's face to the Princess's, and back at the Counselor's. Deanna softened her tone. "No, Imzadi - she needs tenderness. Go and get Dr. Crusher - please."

As Riker left the room, Troi gently stroked Anneia's forehead and spoke soft, soothing words to her. Gradually the terror left the girl's face, and when Riker returned with Dr. Crusher, Princess Anneia was sitting up, her arms around the Counselor, her sobs muffled by Deanna's shoulder. Dr. Crusher had brought a hypospray of sedative with her, but Troi shook her head.

"I think we will talk."

The next morning, Anneia woke much refreshed. Her body still ached, but her spirit felt much lighter. She lay looking at the ceiling, and made her morning devotions, then rose. She realised, with pleasure, that she was hungry.

The day was an exciting one. By now the Enterprise was within

a few hours of Chautara, and she had spoken to her father over the communicator. Her surprise and pleasure at being able to see his image on the viewscreen in the sickbay was infectious, and Data, who had brought the message and shown her how to use the screen, was in his element as he showed her around, explaining all the state-of-the-art technology.

Some hours later, William Riker activated the door to the holodeck, and walked onto the lush meadow selected by the Counselor to remind Anneia of her home planet of Chautara. The Princess was sitting on a rug, playing backgammon with Data. Troi was seated beside them, and they were chatting amicably. Riker strode across the grass, and the Princess looked up, and smiled warmly at the tall First Officer.

"Commander Riker."

"Captain's compliments, Princess Anneia. He wonders if you would join him in his quarters in half an hour for a cup of tea with the bridge crew before beaming down to your planet."

Data looked up from the backgammon board and raised one eyebrow as he noted a pink tinge to the Princess's complexion that had not been there seconds before.

Extraordinary, these Humans, he thought to himself, and brought a hand up to his white, synthoskin face.

"Tell the Captain I'd be delighted, Commander Riker. I have been looking forward to meeting him."

Captain Picard walked over to the dispenser and ordered drinks.

"Earl Grey for two - hot. And six coffees."

As the dispenser whirled into action, he turned and looked around the room. The bridge crew was assembled in full dress uniform. His eyes scanned them: Commander William Riker, standing close to Counselor Troi, engaged in conversation with the massive Klingon warrior, Worf. Lt. Tasha Yar, Chief of Security, leaned over a compscreen, her arm across young Wesley Crusher's shoulders as he tabbed in specifications of his latest brainwave. Lt. Commander Data and Lt. Geordi La Forge were in animated discussion. Dr. Beverly Crusher was seated where she could look out of the viewport at the stars. Picard felt a surge of pride and pleasure wash over him, and was not surprised when Troi looked up, caught his eye, and smiled.

The Captain carried the tray over to the low table, and arranged the cups next to a vase containing a single rosebud.

The door opened, and everyone turned. Princess Anneia stood framed in the doorway, her slim form robed in a full-length gown of aquamarine. Captain Picard stood to attention and bowed his head slightly.

"Your Royal Highness - I am honoured."

Anneia smiled warmly, and came towards him extending both hands

in greeting. As Jean-Luc Picard took her hands, she made a low curtsy, and as she bowed her head, her lips touched his hands.

"The honour is mine, Captain Picard. I owe you my life."

She straightened up, and her hazel eyes looked unblinkingly into his. Jean-Luc Picard stood, her hands still held, strangely moved. The girl was not beautiful - not in the way that Deanna or Beverly were beautiful, but there was an openness in the Princess's face and manner that spread warmth and goodwill throughout his being. He searched for the word. Peace. Yes, that was it. The Princess was serenely peaceful.

No-one moved during those few shared moments. Now Picard turned and looked at his crew. Suddenly, they were all pressing forward to say their farewells.

"But this is not 'Goodbye'," Picard reminded them. "Rather, 'a bientot'. We will be meeting again at the Ceremony when Chautara is officially joined to the Federation of Planets."

As he smiled round at the gathering, the Captain's combadge chattered, and he touched it lightly with his fingers.

"Picard."

"Ready to beam Her Royal Highness down, sir."

"Right. On our way to Transporter Room Six. Picard out."

Princess Anneia hurriedly went around the room, saying her farewells to each person individually. Picard smiled as he saw her stand on tiptoes and kiss Data on the cheek. Then she turned and looked at Picard.

"Shall we go, Captain?"

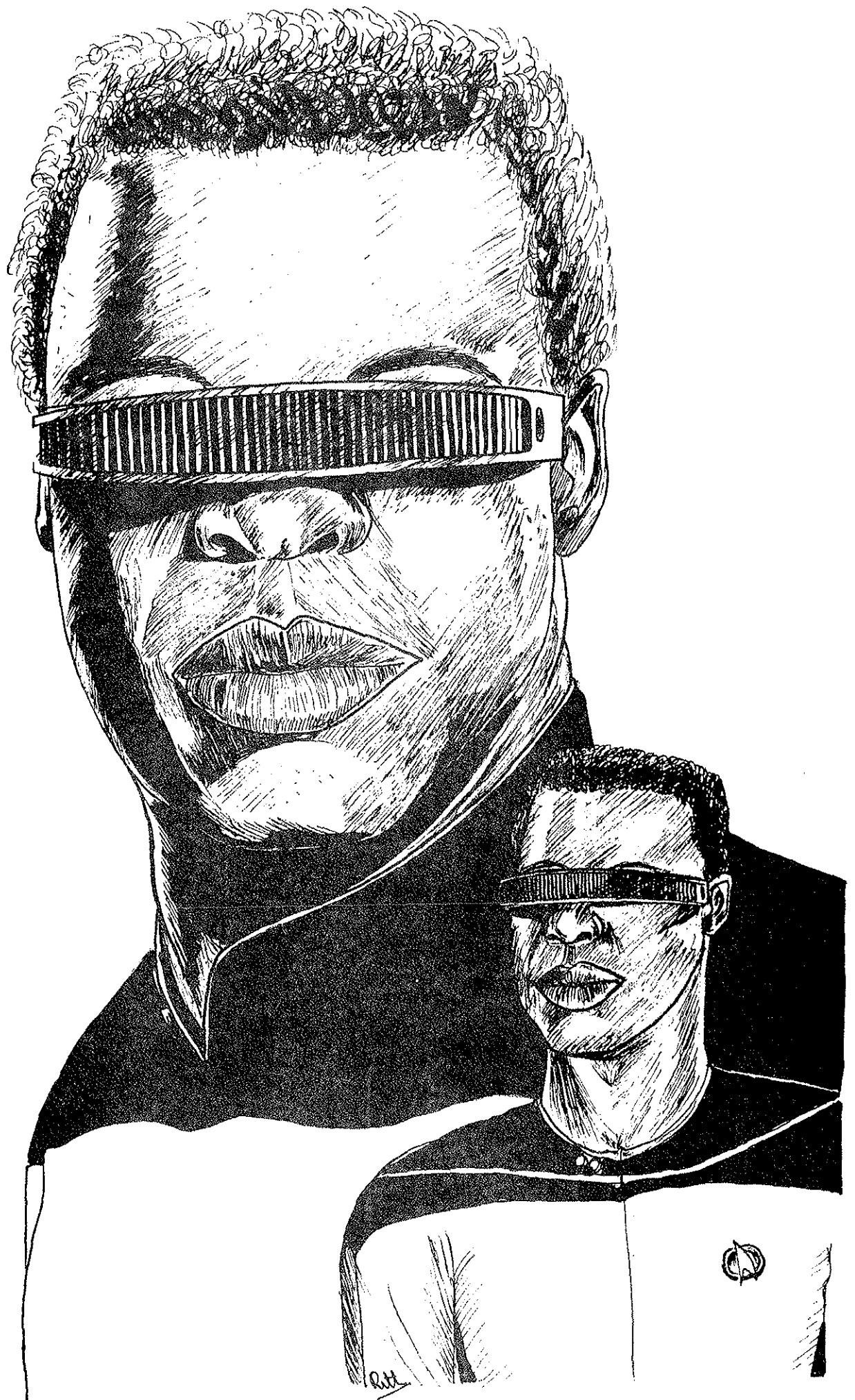
Jean-Luc Picard bowed and offered his arm to the Princess.

Deanna smiled, as she sensed the warmth and tenderness in the simple gesture. Riker, also observing a side to the Captain he had rarely seen, leaned close and whispered something in the Counselor's ear. Too late he saw Data's eyebrows rise, and realised that the android's aural receptors were well able to pick up his 'sotto voce'. Data's golden eyes met Riker's with unflinching innocence.

"Inquiry, Commander." His distinctive tenor resounded round the room. "'Softening up the old Burrhog'?"

In the doorway, Picard came to an abrupt halt. Everybody in the room held their breath, and every inch of Riker's enormous frame visibly cringed. Suddenly, Deanna Troi covered her mouth to suppress the giggle that rose in her. What the others saw was the stiff, inscrutable back of their Captain. What Deanna knew as her Betazoid instincts reached out to him was that at this moment Jean-Luc Picard's face was wreathed in a ridiculous, lop-sided grin.





COMPANIONS

by

Mary Soon Lee

Picard bowed low, arms open wide in his best approximation of the Elsazi sign of respect.

"We are honoured by your trust. The Federation is anxious to learn your ways. Forgive us when we transgress."

Picard had a crick in his neck from stooping in the low rooms, and he was feeling frustrated. He was also annoyed that he and his First Officer had both been tied up by this effort at diplomacy, especially since there were others on the Enterprise who were intensely curious about this world. Unfortunately it would have been taken as a mark of disrespect to send anyone other than the highest ranking officers. Indeed, the Elsazi were a people to whom ritual and tradition took on an almost mystical significance, and Picard was not about to jeopardise their goodwill by any hastiness now.

The two Elsazi facing Picard bowed in turn and the rounder one spoke. "Our rooms are always open to you, Picard-Riker. Will you stay the night?" The pair looked at Riker, whose turn it was to speak, according to their convention.

This was the offer for which the two Federation officers had been waiting. Acceptance would form the outward proof of trust that would cement their fragile links with the Elsazi.

"We are honoured by your offer. We are happy to stay." Riker too bowed.

The Elsazi backed away down the tunnel with the Enterprise officers following - Riker bending almost fully over to avoid the archways.

The Elsazi stopped at the entrance to a comparatively large chamber. This time the flatter one spoke. "May the night bring us all closer." It bowed obsequiously for a final time and then backed away again with its companion.

Picard moved into the room and sat down gratefully. In the morning he and Riker could return to the ship, agreements complete, but for now he was happy to go to bed. He watched Riker pacing around the room, and relaxing back to his full height. An easy companionship stretched between the two; early mutual respect had changed over the years to a friendship they both valued highly.

"Sir, do you recognise this?" Riker was holding what looked like a liquid ball, its surface formed of shifting shades of blue.

Picard picked it up thoughtfully. In his hands the object turned to a deeply glowing purple. It felt cool and watery to the touch, but preserved its shape.

"No, I do not. Perhaps the Elsazi will enlighten us in the morning." He handed it back to Riker, amusement lightening his expression. "Still hoping to find some basis for the legends about the Elsazi, Number One?"

"Today they seemed too ordinary, Captain. Very restrained and unimaginative. This is the first sign of anything more, and it was Troi who was determined that we should investigate as fully as possible." Riker marched over to the second couch. "Good night, Captain."

"Good night, Number One."

Picard's chest was on fire. He had been running for only ten minutes, but in the high gravity he was already shattered. On either side of him the dense tangle of plants tore at his uniform. The track was going steadily upwards, and Picard could taste the fear in his mouth. He could not keep going much longer, but the Helgan hounds were catching up. He could hear them demolishing the undergrowth close behind him. Picard raced round a bend and staggered to a stop. The path had ended in a clearing on the brink of an impossibly high cliff. Far below, Picard could make out a black sea. His options appeared to have reduced to zero. As he stood there gasping, the strangeness of his situation hit him. Nothing made sense. Looking over the cliff was making him feel dizzy. Deliberately, Jean-Luc Picard stepped forward and over the edge of the cliff.

"I am dreaming," he commanded himself. "This world is not real. I am in control."

His descent slowed in time with his thoughts, and Picard began to relax, the edge of tension now leaving only a feeling of exhilaration.

As he fell, Picard noticed a blob in the sea which gradually resolved into a couple entwined around each other. There was something familiar about them, but it was only just before he hit the water that Picard recognised Riker and Troi.

"Sorry to drop in on you," he said before drenching them as he splashed down.

The pair turned towards him, still tangled together. With mild surprise Picard saw that they were both naked, but the tenderness with which they were embracing perplexed him more.

Troi laughed, "My companion was getting tired anyway. My name is Deanna Troi, and this is Bill Riker."

Beside her Riker was now frowning at Picard. "Captain? You do not belong here."

Picard grinned. "I did not expect to find you here either, Number One, nor you, Counselor - " and then Picard noticed that Troi had vanished. Accepting this as a minor inconsistency, Picard rolled over onto his back. Overhead the clouds were gathering and it felt like rain.

"It's getting rougher, Captain. We should swim ashore."

Riker began swimming rapidly and Picard followed, watching the waves growing around them. A warm wind had started up, and it was now raining hard. Riker looked relieved when they reached the beach.

"There are sometimes freak waves when the weather changes."

Picard nodded. Far out at sea he could make out a tiny bump in the blackness. "Like that, Number One?"

"No, sir. That looks like a tidal wave."

The bump grew steadily.

"Captain, this should not be happening."

"I apologise, the laws of reality are somewhat less effective when I am dreaming."

Riker stared at him. "Your dreams, sir?"

Picard was absorbed by the wave. The situation felt like a game and he was starting to enjoy himself. The wave was perhaps a minute away from them, and easily as tall as the cliff.

"Come on, Number One. It's time to leave."

Picard willed himself upwards, trying to visualise the beach growing smaller beneath him. Nothing changed. He remained firmly on the sand. The black wall of water was rushing towards them. Riker was looking increasingly disturbed. Picard imagined flying again, but all he could see was the wave towering above him. Then the crest of the wave toppled towards him, and Picard's world filled with the sound of crashing water.

Picard shot upright in his bed. He was wet all over, his head was throbbing and he felt ill. It had been years since he had such an uncontrollable nightmare. Forcing himself to breathe normally he examined his surroundings. A dull green glow from the object that Riker had found lit the room dimly. The stillness was only broken by Riker tossing in his sleep. Picard briefly considered waking him up, but dismissed the idea. As he sat there he felt increasingly foolish, and after a little while he lay back down and tried to sleep.

This time Picard found himself standing in a forest on a clear spring day. Some small grey creature scurried across in front of him and hid itself in a heap of dirt at the base of one of the larger trees. Following it around, Picard noticed a young man sitting with his head buried in his hands. Picard felt awkward watching and walked quietly away.

As he went an odd picture teased him of the same man crouched beside a great wrinkly creature who stared intently at the young man from its three oval eyes. Picard recognised the beast as a Halm, a long-lived sentient species of a rather insular nature. The image troubled Picard with its vividness: he knew he had never seen a Halm. Meanwhile the wind was driving into Picard's face, and with it a woody, smoky smell. Picard snapped back to attention - the

woods below were burning. In the distance flames swept through the trees, clouds of smoke rising slowly above them. The wind was driving the edge of the fire towards him, and he turned and ran back.

"Fire!" he shouted as he reached the young man.

Together they ran on, smoke and heat thickening around them, the strangeness of such a fire in a damp spring wood nagging at Picard. They reached a nearby peak and Picard saw all around him and beneath him a world on fire. Disbelief gnawed at him, as the heat beat at them like a hammer. He looked at the young man and the face, half-familiar, slotted into place, while the fire rose around them and enveloped them in flame.

For the second time, Picard started up from the couch. Reality reasserted itself. In the flickering red light he saw Riker watching him from across the room, tears still streaming down his face. Something in the other man's vulnerability exposed more clearly his likeness to the younger Riker of Picard's dream.

"Captain, I think we should call the ship."

"Will - are you all right?"

"I will be, when we get out of here." Riker paused. "Captain, I do not believe that these are simple nightmares. I can remember too many strange dreams and you were in them all. I watched you being carried out of a fight by Jack Crusher, and then I watched you carrying his body back to Beverly. I saw you falling from a horse ten times your size when you were a child... and much more. I did not imagine these images. And they were not my memories... At other times I felt you watching me."

Picard nodded. "All right, Number One. I agree. But we will not contact the Enterprise. The Elsazi were most emphatic about that. In any event the answer to this matter lies here, and running away is not likely to help."

"Yes, sir. But I am not keen on sleeping again."

"Indeed." Picard waited for Riker to relax, and considered the situation. "I think we should evaluate the extent of this problem. How did I do in the entrance exam for Starfleet?"

Riker did not hesitate. "Which time? The first time you were failed for insubordination. The second time you were given one of the highest evaluations on record."

Picard nodded grimly. "Very well then. What did I have for breakfast yesterday?"

"It is not that comprehensive, Sir. But as I sit here the main memories seem to be getting clearer."

Picard had not yet had time to absorb the full implications of their discoveries. But Riker was right about their increasing clarity. He could now remember how Urzot - the Halm - had died, and he wished his First Officer had not had to witness it. He did not feel any loss of identity, but the memories of Riker were side by side with his own. He felt intensely curious about them, but tried

not to dwell on them. Picard had always been a basically private person, opening up to people very much on his own terms. It was not the kind of insight he wanted anyone to have, and he guessed that Riker felt the same way. It was going to be a long wait until morning.

Data hesitated outside Troi's living quarters. He knew that some people were very sensitive about being disturbed late at night. Still, Troi had asked him to contact her as soon as he noticed anything unusual. The problem was that this was such a minor point. He had just decided to go back and check with the computer again, when Troi opened the door.

"Come in, Data. I thought it must be you."

Troi had obviously not been asleep. She was still in her uniform, and her console was activated. Having come this far, Data launched straight in.

"I ran a standard check on the Captain and the Commander. According to their medical sensors they have both been awake for the last three hours."

Troi absorbed this information silently. Data leant forward and brought up the relevant readouts on the screen. Troi stared at them for a moment, and then changed the focus of the graphs. Rapidly she scanned through them and reprocessed the readouts. It took Data a fraction of a second to spot the pattern in the new graphs, but he had not thought of looking for one before.

"The structure is the same in both. What does it mean?"

Troi looked at him. "It would seem that they have been having the same dreams. This could explain much about the Elsazi. However, as far as the Captain and Riker are concerned, they will be finding it very disturbing. You must decide whether to contact them."

"Will it harm them if I do not?"

"I do not believe it will make their situation worse to wait until morning. However the Elsazi may take the process further."

Data rapidly evaluated his options. "Thank you. I shall not contact them yet. However I shall monitor them for any additional changes."

"Are you going back to the bridge?"

"Yes. I *am* in command."

Troi's eyebrows rose. "Even when you are in charge you do not have to be on duty at all times. But on this occasion I think I shall join you."

She stood up and followed Data out of the room.

Although Picard was only across the room from him, Riker felt lonely. He also felt tired and angry, but washing over those

sensations was a wave of sadness. He had not felt like this for years, not even when Tasha died. But the dreams of Urzot had thrown him back into the days after his friend's death. It had been just after Riker entered Starfleet Academy, and just after the worst in a long-running series of disagreements with his father. His supervisor at the Academy had told him to go away for a few weeks and get things back into perspective. Riker had duly left, but the rest of the advice was hard to obey. He had not been able to think of Urzot without remembering its death. Once back at the Academy he had been distracted by the need to catch up with the rest of his class; but even months later, he found it difficult to think of Urzot without a mixture of regret and messy memories predominating. In this mood Riker was glad when the two Elsazi reappeared at the entrance to the room. They both bowed low to the ground, and then gestured for Riker and Picard to follow them.

Glancing quickly at the Captain for confirmation, Riker stooped his way back along the tunnels. His curiosity had returned, and he was trying to imagine how their society operated, when the Elsazi stopped outside a bright round room. It had the first windows they had seen on the planet, looking out over a misty stretch of water. Seated in the centre of this room was a single Elsazi. The significance of this was not lost on Riker - the Elsazi had never previously been observed alone. In the creature's eyes were the same fluctuating patterns of blue as in the object that Riker had found the night before.

"Come in, Captain Picard, Commander Riker." As Riker and Picard complied, the other Elsazi silently disappeared. "I regret that you found our gift disturbing. It is now a time when you may ask questions freely." The Elsazi paused.

"Who are you?" Picard asked.

The Elsazi vibrated gently, with what Riker hoped was amusement. "I am one-who-dreams. If the others whom you have seen are the fabric of the dream we make, then I am one of those who shapes the pattern. In your terms you might call me a leader, but I am also a custodian. I share and hold many dreams - including yours."

To his own surprise, Riker did not find this information particularly disturbing. After his initial shock, he no longer objected to Picard's intimate knowledge of his past. He found it much more distressing to have to ignore the Captain's memories, than to worry about his own loss of privacy. Picard however radiated a controlled anger.

"Is it part of your tradition to force strangers to join you in such a ritual without explaining its nature?"

"Is it part of yours to offer friendship without wishing for understanding?" The Elsazi seemed disappointed rather than cross. "As a race we have been very self-absorbed. That was, at best, a luxury which we can no longer afford. At worst, it may have been a serious narrowing of our vision. But a time is coming when those races in this corner of the galaxy must help each other. Rumours, and more than rumours, have reached us of the ones you call the Borg."

Riker shivered inwardly, as menace seemed to creep into the room. "How would you help us?"

"You have tasted the edge of what we are. You had heard before that we have magic here." The Elsazi vibrated again, and then made a slight gesture with one hand. Two chairs appeared in front of it. "Sit. I brought these here, not with your intricate mechanical devices, but with a simple summoning. But it is not a true magic. It is merely a different perspective on how the universe operates. This is part of what we offer you... If there is time we could teach you much."

"You speak of teaching and magic. What do you seek from us?" Picard's tone was cool, but Riker thought the anger had left it.

"What we were building is of little use against an enemy. We wish to learn of weapons, and of engineering, of tactics and of war. These could be your gift, full of bitterness, but offering us hope. But first I should like to touch your minds again, to watch the pattern of your thoughts. I have observed but the outside of your memories. Before we commit to a full co-operation, I must know the texture of your feelings."

"You ask us now when you took before. Could you not have taken this last night?"

"Captain Picard, what passed last night has to us little more significance than a conversation. I am now asking for much more than this, and although we could take it from you against your will, that would violate our ethics."

"Would you need both of us?"

"No, Commander. Either one of you is acceptable. That would break our traditions, but not our principles."

"Then I volunteer." Riker was motivated mainly by the need to safeguard Captain Picard, but also a relentless curiosity.

Picard looked at Riker with some incredulity. "Are you sure about this, Number One?"

Riker nodded. "Quite sure."

"It would be better to begin at once. Captain Picard, we could send you back to your ship."

Picard leant over and gripped Riker's shoulder. "I'll stay."

Troi was worried. She was always concerned when anyone from the ship was in trouble, but this morning she was also annoyed with herself. Perhaps because she was tired, she was feeling guilty that she might be more concerned about Bill Riker than Jean-Luc Picard. She thought she had come to terms with her relationship, or lack of it, with Riker, but every so often she felt this sense of frustration, of missed opportunities. Sighing, she forced her attention back to the here and now.

"You could always get some rest, Deanna." It was Dr. Crusher speaking.

"No. I'm fine. I am just a little frustrated. We have so little information about the Elsazi, most of it rumours. And I can sense almost nothing from them."

"And from the Captain and the Commander?"

"Anxiety. Curiosity." *And earlier on, loneliness; grief, she remembered silently.*

"They have reached the surface now, and they are with only one Elsazi." Data had been monitoring them all night.

Troi was busy letting down her internal barriers, trying to distinguish the Captain and Riker. As she knew them both well, it was comparatively easy. But there was always a moment of fear - like stepping off the high diving board, and committing yourself to the descent. And then, as their emotions swept through her, there was the struggle to maintain a certain distance, to translate the sensations into words. At intervals, Deanna spoke into the otherwise silent bridge.

"Anger. The Captain is very angry... Now they are both afraid, but not of the Elsazi... The Captain is worried about himself and Riker, and he is very reluctant to do something the Elsazi wants." Troi broke off, her hands gripping the edge of the seat beneath her. "Riker has agreed to whatever it was. I want to establish a deeper link to him."

"Make it so." Data indicated to Dr. Crusher to look after Troi, and turned back to his console.

For Troi, there was a feeling of stripping down some very private shield. From the start she had been peculiarly sensitive to Riker's thoughts, and he had proved to be the only non-telepath who had been able to hear her back. Now she deliberately re-opened the connection, and with disconcerting ease slid into place.

Desolation welling up in pools of loneliness. Grief. Loss. And then a flicker of recognition, no longer followed by rejection. Concern accepted, welcomed. Thoughts clinging to her. And something else. In the background, observing. Many viewpoints balanced together, an impression of great age, but not age; something waking into sorrow. From what? Vaguer impressions of shared warmth, companionship. And then the background observer losing its neutrality, sweeping towards them, nudging them together, folding itself over the lonely parts. And offering something more, a brush of vision, a sweep of... what? Ecstasy? Union? A deep, quiet, passionate, living peace. An impossible dream.

"Deanna?" Riker started up, saw the room, the Elsazi, the Captain.

"She was with us." The Elsazi stared at him intently. "We did not guess that it would feel like this. So bitter beside the joy. So painfully difficult your communion. So incomplete." It shuddered into silence, and sat a while. "You are free to come and go as you will. I apologise for underestimating your vulnerability." It shuddered again. "The Elsazi formally agree to your offer of talks, and we petition for admission to the Federation."

Picard measured the Elsazi with his own stare. "We will let them know. Enterprise, this is Captain Picard. Bring us back."

In the transporter room, Deanna Troi was waiting. When Riker materialized, she had to stop herself from reaching out to him. But he came over to her.

"Thank you," he said aloud.

And in her mind, clearer than before, *I will always be your friend.*

And I yours.

Captain Picard stepped down beside him, his face uncharacteristically red - visualising Troi and Riker tangled together in the sea.

"Captain, I sense great embarrassment."

"An irrepressible memory."

Troi and Riker deliberately pretended not to understand. Picard strode out of the transporter room, but the sound of their laughter followed after him.

